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THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



The background of the entire page is a vibrant, colorful illustration from the game Splatooon. It depicts a character with a green body and a large white hat, suspended in the air as if being launched or falling. Another character, a purple rabbit-like creature with glasses and a polka-dot shirt, is in the foreground, holding a long yellow paintbrush and painting a large purple splat on the ground. The scene is set in a stylized urban environment with graffiti-covered walls and a bridge in the background. The overall aesthetic is playful and energetic, with a lot of splashing paint in various colors like green, purple, orange, and blue.

Nintendo®

Splatooon

“Splatooon keeps on getting bigger”

– Game Informer

“More free content is planned for the rest of the summer and fall... Sounds good to me!”

– Destructoid

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Cartoon Violence

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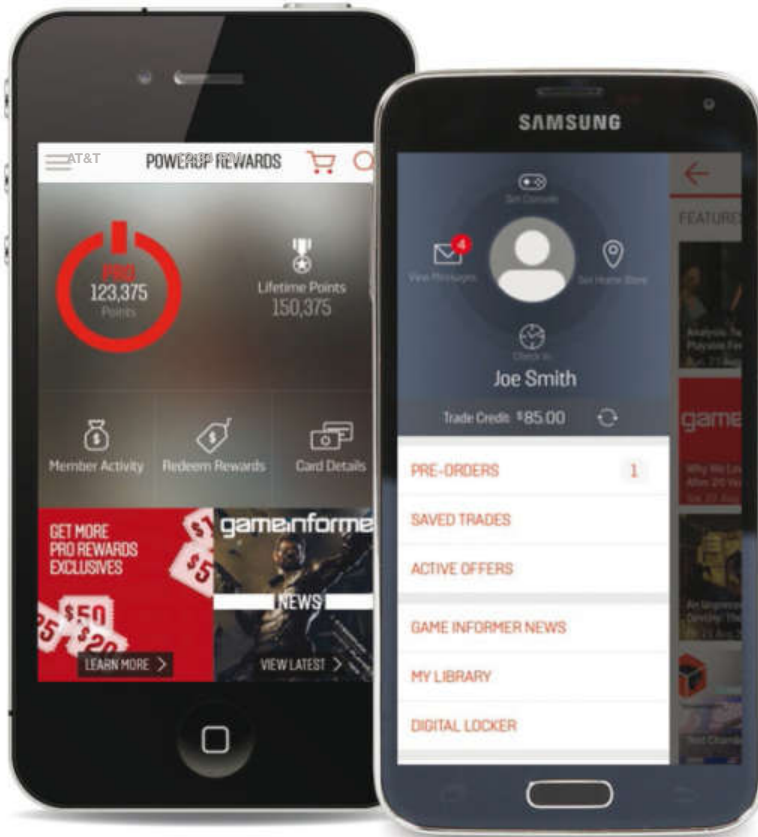
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ISSUES** OF GAME INFORMER
MAGAZINE



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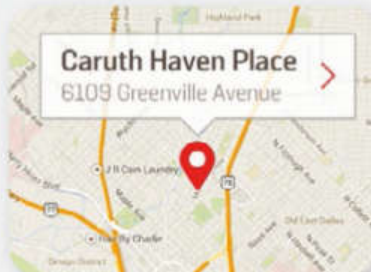


Other Features

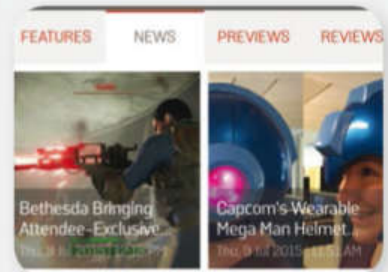
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GameInformer News



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GET TO KNOW THE PROS

Say hello to the friendly faces of **PowerUp Rewards**.



ASSOCIATE SPOTLIGHT

Nick / CA

What upcoming game are you most excited for?

I can't wait for Fallout 4. It's gonna be amazeballs.

Who is your gamer crush (any game character)?

Alex Vance from Half-Life has a special place in my heart. I still have hope for a 3. Someday.....

Which virtual reality device are you most excited for?

I have had a chance to try Project Morpheus and it's pretty awesome. I would love to play No Man's Sky with that kind of immersion.

Batman or Robin? And why?

Batman. Because if you can be Batman, be Batman.

What's the best thing about the PowerUp Rewards program?

Those awesome GameStop exclusive collectibles. All that cool gear! And now there is stuff from ThinkGeek!

Jacob / CA

What new game are you most excited for?

Star Wars™ Battlefront

What is the longest time you ever spent playing a video game?

57 hour marathon

Who is your gaming crush?

Yennefer from the Witcher series

Are you a collector?

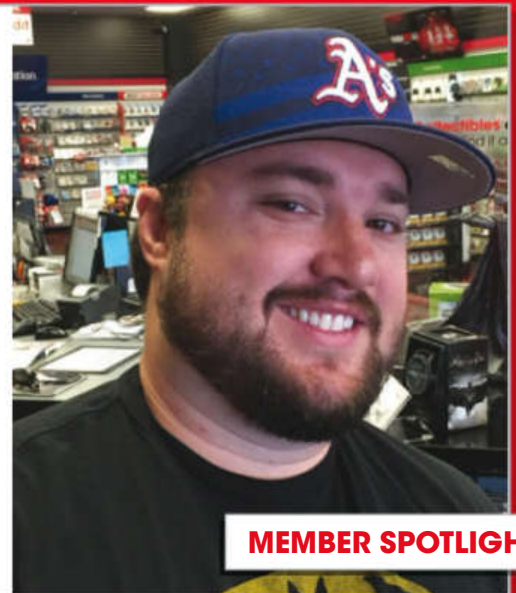
Yes. Statues, games, books and all Batman collectibles.

If you could re-make one game from the past, which would it be?

Captain Skyhawk

Give us your best gamer pickup line.

You might need to catch them all, but all I need to catch is you.



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

POWER UP REWARDS CATALOG

welcomes

THINKGEEK



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Shark Slippers
18,500 POINTS



Firefly Malcolm Reynolds
Metal-plated Pistol
Prop Replica
70,000 POINTS



Mega Man Mega
Buster Gun Replica
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Merle's Knife Hand
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Dark Souls Is Difficult In More Ways Than One



ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or
comment on this letter at
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Whenever I hear someone say the words, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade,” I can’t help but think to myself that might be the most annoying phrase ever uttered. Unfortunately, this month *Game Informer* got a crate load of lemons and we found ourselves with little choice but to make the proverbial lemonade.

Bandai Namco approached us before E3 this year with some exciting news about the direction it was going to take the *Dark Souls* series with partner From Software. It pitched us the design to see if we found the game and the information cover worthy. Unfortunately, our options were limited by the planned reveal at the Microsoft press conference and we had to pass on the opportunity, but that wasn’t the end of our conversations.

We circled back with the publisher to see if we could discuss some of the more interesting aspects of the game and features it had originally showed us that still hadn’t been revealed. We felt these were the most compelling changes to the third installment in the series. After a couple of strike outs as we discussed what would or would not be available, we finally found an angle that worked for all involved.

At *Game Informer*, our goal is to get our readers the best information available on the games that we think are defining the medium, from blockbusters to indies and everything in between. We never previously had a chance to get a game in the surprise smash series *Dark Souls* on our cover, so we were excited by this opportunity.

A mere 48 hours before our visit we were told by Bandai Namco that everything was green lit. During the trip, we had a pleasant conversation with famed developer Hidetaka Miyazaki about his influences and design philosophy, but when the subject turned to *Dark Souls III* he refused to comment on any of the new systems. Our promised hands-on play session was also denied. This was just the beginning of a twisted story that had Bandai Namco (and *Game Informer*) in complete disarray.

None of our contacts at the company could tell us what went wrong, but just days before taking the issue to press we were being told that they would right the ship and get us the promised info. That information never arrived. We were told the Japanese branch of the company had gone silent and was ignoring messaging. We were told From Software refused to cooperate.

We ultimately have no idea who is telling the truth and who isn’t, but either way the story went from a compelling look at an exciting game to a disaster of the highest proportions. Promise after promise was broken; Bandai Namco and From Software failed to deliver at just about every point.

We have an interview about the *Dark Souls* series, details on the new game, and great perspective from our talented team, but this story is much different than our normal deep dive. Given the shortage of time to find a replacement cover story, I can do nothing but apologize and hope you find our glimpse at the behind-the-scenes happenings of game development intriguing – along with the unique look at a developer and publisher who have managed to create greatness despite the disasters behind the scenes. The story, with this added drama, makes for compelling reading. Our writer, Daniel Tack, does a great job of discussing the series and its creator. Despite our hardships, we are still excited about the game.

Cheers,

» 38

Dark Souls III

From Software’s third entry in the *Dark Souls* universe takes players in exciting new directions, adding interesting combat options and a novel approach to magic. Director Hidetaka Miyazaki shares details on the next installment of the dark fantasy franchise while leaving other features inexplicably mysterious, and we get a glimpse into the creator’s complex personality.
by Daniel Tack



IT'S GO TIME

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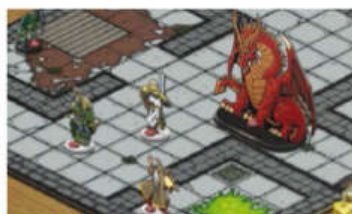


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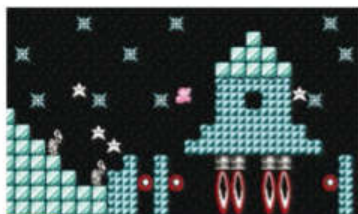
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A very special reader writes in to thank us for our Tacoma coverage last month, while others complain about our Sonic reviews. We also find out what game inspired the most excitement out of E3, and readers share their thoughts on Final Fantasy XV.

» 14 Connect

We check in on Germany's biggest video game trade show, Gamescom, remain amazed at how many people love eSports, and share some of our favorite mobile games. We also talk to the creators of Rocket League and look at the female characters of Witcher 3.

» 54 Previews

We look at some of our most anticipated games, Rise of the Tomb Raider and Fallout 4, as we count down the few short months until release. We also discover what's new for the sequels to Crackdown, Assassin's Creed, and XCOM.

» 82 Reviews

We finally have our review for the highly anticipated Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain, as well as the anticipated – but for radically different reasons – Super Mario Maker. We've also spent plenty of time with Madden 16 and Disney Infinity's Star Wars content.

5 ASCENT GUM

AN INTENSIFYING WINTERMINT



STIMULATE YOUR SENSES



Microsoft's backward compatibility won over readers this month, while others debated multiplayer-focused games, Final Fantasy XV, and our Sonic Generations review. Loving Sonic never goes out of style.

Kid Tested, Mother Approved

Thank you for a wonderful story about my son's game, Tacoma (Leaving Home For Space, issue 268). I am so proud of Steven, Karla, and their team, and so happy about their successes. I was there on a couple of visits when just the three original developers were working on Gone Home; first in the dining room of Rachel's family home, and then in the basement of their second home when they were still The Fullbright Company with the light bulb icon, which I admit I miss. Their new name and logo are admittedly more sophisticated. I'm excited to see the finished product.

Cherie Gaynor
via email

Our cover stories usually garner a fair amount of letters from interested readers, but this is the first time we've ever had a developer's mom write in. Fullbright's Steve Gaynor took it in stride when we teased him about it on *The GI Show*, calling proud moms "a universal constant." For more on Tacoma, visit gameinformer.com/tacoma.

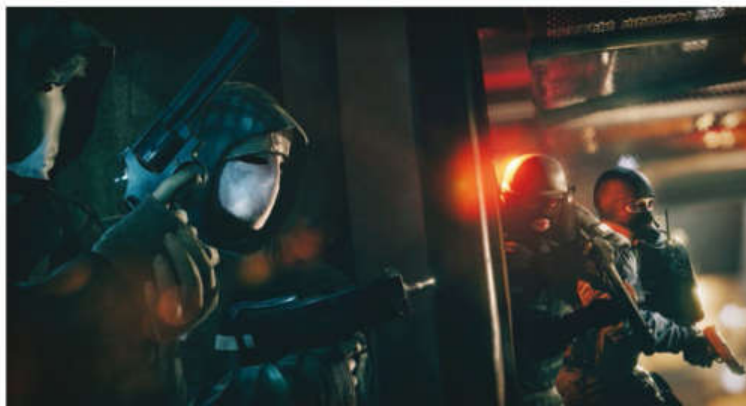
A Siege On Single-Player

Today I learned that Rainbow Six Siege won't feature a traditional, story-based campaign mode, but will instead include a "Missions" mode. First the new Star Wars Battlefront is multiplayer-driven, and now Siege? At least Call of Duty always features a dedicated campaign – some of us would like to enjoy a game without having to compete in matches against other people.

Ben Gentry
via email

A number of recent games like Titanfall and Evolve have eschewed

traditional single-player campaigns, and more upcoming titles are following suit. Why? It allows developers to spend the extra time and resources on the core multiplayer experience, instead of a superfluous campaign that offers little replay value. It's an argument multiplayer fans have been making for years, but we can't blame solo players for not liking the results. Games like Star Wars Battlefront and Rainbow Six Siege are trying harder to find an agreeable middle ground, but we'll have to wait and see if their scaled-back offerings can keep the single-player crowd happy.



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Are Your Save Files Safe?

After learning that Xbox One would be backward compatible with the Xbox 360, I was extremely excited. I'm one of those people who are behind in the console world and only have an Xbox 360. I can finally still play my 360 games when I trade in my 360 to help buy an Xbox One! But then I realized something: Will you also be able to transfer your save data from the 360 to the Xbox One?

Matt Hay
via email

Microsoft scored major points with its backward compatibility announcement at this year's E3, even if a number of questions remained after the show. We're still waiting for a list of the 100-plus titles that will reportedly be available by the holidays, but Microsoft has confirmed that Xbox Live Gold members who save their files to the cloud can use them across systems. Saves on USB drives won't be supported, however.

The Generations Gap

I am a massive Game Informer fan, but recently I noticed something. I've been playing Sonic Generations, and I've found it to be a lot more fun than your review says it is. I know that a game receiving a 6 is considered to have "Limited Appeal," but I had so much fun with it, that I find it hard to believe it is that bad. I think the reason for this is that, as an 11-year old boy, I can find the best in games; whereas you only see the worst. Can you acknowledge that?

Ben
via email

On the contrary, Ben. A game that appeals exclusively to 11-year-old Sonic fans is pretty much the definition of "Limited Appeal." Still, we're glad you're enjoying the game!



Downloadable Discontent

I'm officially done with gamers who complain about DLC being released too early, the existence of season passes, and the rising price of both. I run into gamers all the time that feel they're entitled to every piece of content developers make for one of their games at no additional cost. This argument blows my mind! I get that some in the community feel developers are purposely holding back content from the game to sell as DLC or deciding to lock it behind a season pass. I used to support that sentiment, but I realized we're literally demanding these companies and their employees work for free. If you don't think the content in a DLC pack or season pass warrants your dollars, guess what? You don't have to buy it. That's what consumers want anyway: the ability to choose.

Anthony Jacobs
via email

Some gamers remain stubbornly opposed to DLC, but based on last issue's Question of the Month, more and more players have no problem buying post-release content for games they love. That shifting opinion likely comes from developers homing in on what constitutes a good deal. While every expansion and season pass might not hit the mark, we agree with Anthony; the blind condemnation of DLC is getting old.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Am I the only one that would love a Call of Duty: Civil War?"

Yes.

"Is it just me, or is Call of Duty losing more and more interest each E3?"

It's you.

"What is your take on how games are getting so overhyped that when we buy them and play them and there not that good?"

Huh?

Most Unoriginal Complaint Ever:

"I write to complain about the current lack of originality in video games."

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"how to way from post?"

Question Of The Month:

What is the best in-game reward you've ever received and why?



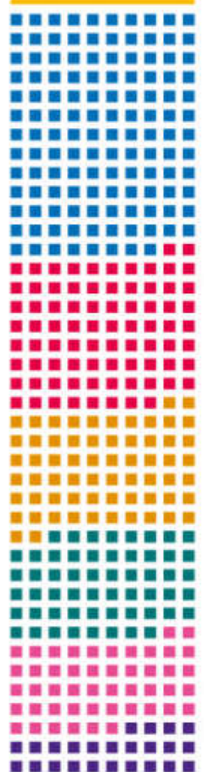
(Left) This month we visited From Software's headquarters in Tokyo, Japan to speak with Dark Souls III director Hidetaka Miyazaki. We're not sure that's the kind of bonfire you want to warm your hands by, guys...

(Right) You can't tackle QuakeCon without a hearty meal. From left to right: Angela Ramsey, Matt Grandstaff, Geoff Keighley, Andrea Rene, Adam Sessler, Erin Losi, Mari Garcia, and Jeremy Long

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

(continued on page 12)

On Your Mind



- E3's Offerings
- Fallout 4 Excitement
- Backward-Compatibility Fanfare
- Mad About Multiplayer Games
- VR Interest
- Irate Nintendo Fans



Can't Hardly Wait

In issue 268, we asked readers what their most anticipated game is coming out of E3. Unsurprisingly, a vault-laden wasteland came out on top. Here are some of the responses we received.

I've been waiting for years for Fallout 4. I started playing the last two entries on PC after modding the crap out of them, and I had a lot of fun. With an expanded mod system, enhanced graphics, better world and enemy physics, creating towns from scratch, and possibly having PC mods available for my PS4, Bethesda has completely blown away my expectations for this game.

Austin Valdovino

I'm excited for The Legend of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes. My brothers and I love the Zelda franchise and we love cooperative multiplayer games even more. I play a lot with my older brother, but my younger brother hasn't had much of a chance to get involved. This game looks like it could be perfect for getting all three of us gaming together.

Porter Bagley

Kingdom Hearts III has long been my most anticipated video game. After playing through Kingdom Hearts II on the PS2, I instantly fell in love with the series. This year's E3 shined the light on KH III and filled me with euphoria. The gameplay is more fluid and creative (dual laser guns transformed from the Keyblade!), with even bigger open-world environments. I cannot wait to be in control of Sora once more and continue his adventure alongside his friends. If Tetsuya Nomura and the rest of the Square Enix team have been listening to fans like me, I have no doubt that this will be the best Kingdom Hearts of them all.

Jacob Rouse

Out Of Turn

I'm noticing more and more that Final Fantasy titles are shifting away from turn-based combat and more into action/RPG-style fights. I admit that modern gamers are more interested in fast-paced, fast-reward gaming rather than deliberate, tactical gameplay. But be honest: If you took Final Fantasy XV, removed the recurring motifs like summon magic and Moogles, gave it a new name, and declared it entirely unrelated to FF, I doubt any gamer would so much as raise an eyebrow. Square Enix's genre shift in recent years doubtlessly has both its supporters and critics, but I am firmly in the latter category on this issue. I have no doubt Final Fantasy XV will be a fun, exciting game – it just won't feel like Final Fantasy.

Joshua Aponte
via email

Final Fantasy has undergone drastic changes over the years, to the point where it has little in common with its founding titles. However, that willingness to change is arguably what allowed the series to survive so long. The constant influx of new characters, settings, and mechanics has drawn in old and new players alike for 28 years. That said, you should check out Bravely Second: End Layer, which is pretty much the mirror opposite of FF XV. It's got all the classic turn-based mechanics, just without the Final Fantasy name.



(Left) Forget Vegas:

Dan learned that whatever happens at a Wargaming X party should definitely stay there

(Right) Kim got the thumbs up from famed Japanese developer Hideki Kamiya at this year's Gamescom, so she must be doing something right



1



WINNER

1 Ben Hansen

GI's video editor, who is also named Ben Hanson, is getting this art airbrushed onto the side of his van

2 Barbara Gutierrez

If only Nintendo would consider a Pokémon/Zelda crossover game

3 Jonathan Price

Why is Conan always dressed in rags and carrying broken weapons?



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(Left) You couldn't ask for a better group of summer interns than Christian Belland, Hershall Cook, and Alissa McAloon. Thanks for all the hard work!

(Right) Recently, Activision's Jason Corica and Kelvin Liu stopped by to teach Brian and Miller the fine art of rocking out with Guitar Hero Live. Their final grades? F+

connect



NOTABLES

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THE COMPETITIVE EDGE

Performance-Enhancing Drug Use Brings eSports' Integrity Into the Spotlight

by *Matthew Kato*

The popularity and profile of eSports has risen dramatically over the past few years. Evil Geniuses won \$6.6 million at the recent The International 2015 Dota 2 tournament. Heroes of the Storm was broadcast on ESPN2 this spring. Popular streamers are making big money off viewers. Even established brands like Halo 5: Guardians are including eSports features and starting their own leagues around the game. eSports is now an indisputable facet of gaming.

With fame and money at stake, the desire to win – and doing what it takes to get there – increases. Professional gamers train long hours each day, and come tournament time, the time commitment and pressure get even heavier when playing through multiple matches in a single day. Naturally, players may reach for help. Maybe it's keeping hydrated or using energy drinks. Some even use Adderall or Ritalin – two drugs prescribed by doctors to help with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder – to help them focus. The problem with these prescriptions is they could be considered performance-enhancing drugs that give the

user an edge over the competition.

Recent offhand comments by Nihilum team member Kory "Semphis" Friesen and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive streamer and caster Mohan "Launders" Govindasamy about performance-enhancing drug use in the eSports community received a lot of attention in the video game industry and by the mainstream press. Friesen, referring to the messy team communications of Cloud9 (his team at the time) at the Electronic Sports League (ESL) One Katowice 2015 event, told Govindasamy in an interview, "We were all on Adderall." Govindasamy asked, "Everyone does Adderall at ESEA LAN right?" Friesen agreed.

Shortly afterward, the ESL announced plans to institute random drug testing at its LAN events. The MLG told us it bars the use of prohibited drugs, but will not test for them. Similarly, Riot Games, which makes League of Legends and runs its own tournaments, wouldn't comment on the matter other than to say they will not test at events. Valve, which makes Dota 2 and stages The International, did not respond to our inquiries.

Despite this attention, the actual levels of drug use among players is unknown, and how the matter should be approached by the governing bodies is still a topic for debate. Anecdotal evidence of PED use has been around for years, but Govindasamy says that while PED use is not a secret, he doesn't believe it's widespread either. "[Adderall is] not necessarily a staple drug that everybody feels they need to use, and people aren't going to use it if they thought they were going to get caught, because there are definite drawbacks to using Adderall," he says. "[It] may or may not help you, and it's only going to help you during the time you use it. If you're the best team in the world, you don't use Adderall for practice every single day, and then most of your online play – which is the majority of matches you play, by the way."

Friesen told eSports journalist Richard Lewis after the incident, "If anyone was to do Adderall it was only once, you know? It wasn't like we were popping addies ----ing everywhere, going around downing bottles, like...I don't even like it."

Bjoern Franzen, who has worked in marketing to pair sponsorship companies with eSports teams, has been vocal for years about drugs in eSports. He similarly does not believe PEDs are a pathway to success. Nonetheless, he wants to protect the integrity of the sport and reward the abilities of the players who perform legally. "I think the current PEDs are no miracle drugs that make people win tournaments just by taking them," he says. "Maybe the next level PEDs will, but they can close or widen the gap between a world-class player and someone with solid baseline talent who is missing out on some natural and genetic disadvantages like a slower reaction time and certain thinking and focusing capabilities. I totally think that at least some tournament results in the past five years in multiple games were altered by PED usage."

With PED use in eSports simmering under the surface, ESL vice president of pro gaming Michal Blicharz says while the Friesen/Govindasamy video caught the league by surprise, the ESL has been preparing for this kind of moment. "The question of performance-enhancing drugs was an inevitability, so we were readying quite a long time for this," he says.

The ESL is now working with NADA (Nationale Anti-Doping Agentur) in Germany, (where the ESL is headquartered), and WADA (World Anti-Doping Agency) – two organizations already involved in crafting anti-doping policies, testing, and compliance with worldwide standards. The ESL wants to create an anti-drugs policy and education program that fits eSports and can be realistically administered.

What exactly that is, however, is still to be determined. The ESL is testing for PEDs at its ESL One Cologne event via randomized skin tests, but that's just a first step toward a more lasting policy. Anna Rozwandowicz,



head of communication for the ESL, says that randomized tests might not be the way to go in the future, and that the organization is open to adapting its policies.

According to Govindasamy, the reaction in the eSports community to the ESL policy has been mixed, but acknowledges that something has to be done. Blicharz says that response from the teams has been positive. "I do believe overall, all the teams and gamers as a group, what they care about the most is integrity of competition... I don't know a single team manager – and I know quite a few – that wouldn't be happy to comply with what we're putting in place."

Friesen's former team, Cloud9, told The Daily Dot that it backs testing. "Cloud9 does not condone any of its players using illegal performance enhancing drugs. Cloud9 players support efforts by ESL and other tournament operators and are willing to submit to drug tests to ensure competitive integrity of events."

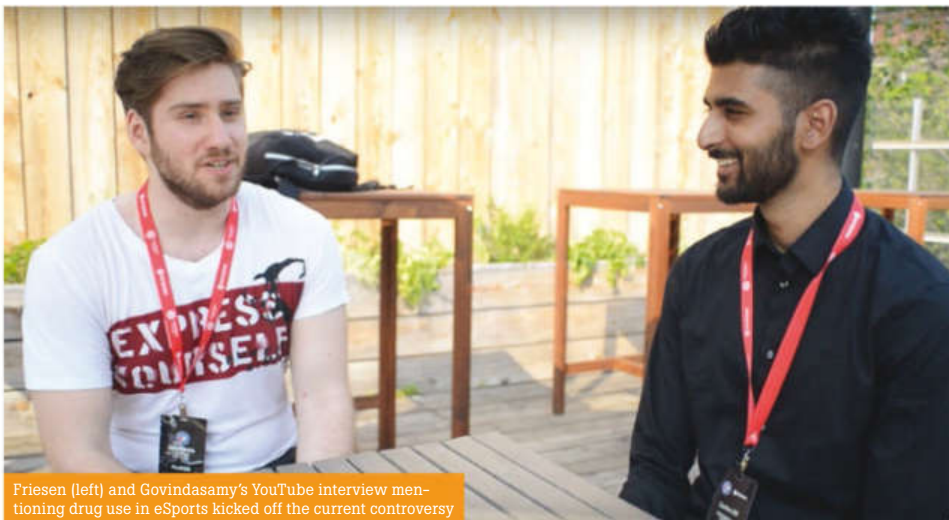
With the ESL's long-term testing and policy still being crafted, it's too early to tell if it will ultimately work. Frazen hopes that the ESL moves beyond

swab tests – which he says don't even stand up to court scrutiny in his native Germany. They are also prone to false positives. However, Govindasamy thinks the existence of a testing policy in and of itself is enough to set a lot of competitors straight.

Other questions remain, such as how the ESL or any other league or event would handle participants who have a valid prescription for a drug like Adderall, whether testing would extend to any online qualifying events (not in-person like a tournament) or lower-league tiers, and who is tested if it's not random.

Whether testing for PEDs really works or even if PED use is really a problem for eSports is ultimately irrelevant. The controversial topic has been broached, and there's no going back now. Whether to protect the integrity of matches, allay the fears of sponsors, retain mainstream interest, or all of the above, the sub-industry and community are going to have to deal with the possibility of drug use from now on. To highlight just one example of what's at stake, Franzen brings up a possible concern for the ESL: The Swedish media company Modern Times Group just acquired a majority stake in the ESL's holding company for \$87 million, and has plans to expand the league and eSports' footprint – a compelling reason to keep the league's reputation from being tainted by PEDs.

Still, Govindasamy says that PEDs aren't even the biggest danger to the future and integrity of eSports, which he believes is cheating via hacking. He says that online you can get away with it since nobody really knows exactly what you're up to, but onsite LAN events with anti-cheating measures such as prohibiting Internet access and bag checks, are considered secure. However, Govindasamy says that a person was recently suspected of cheating at an event using "very sophisticated, remote-access workshop cheats." Thus, eSports' battle for integrity continues. 💎



Friesen (left) and Govindasamy's YouTube interview mentioning drug use in eSports kicked off the current controversy

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RECAPPING GAMESCOM 2015

More than 345,000 visitors watched Microsoft state its case for the Xbox One, while Sony stayed on the sidelines

by Jeff Cork

This year's Gamescom in Cologne, Germany, was different from past events, partially because of the lack of a Sony press conference. The company traditionally has a large footprint at the show, but opted out of having a major presence this year in favor of holding out for the Paris Games Week event near the end of October. Microsoft seemed more than happy to fill that void with its own presser, which featured a variety of game

announcements and new footage from previously revealed titles.

Over the course of an hour and a half, the company showed off extensive demos from Platinum Games' *Scalebound*, a new look at the game/TV show-hybrid *Quantum Break* (including a visit from star Shawn Ashmore), and play-by-play highlights from a *Halo 5* multiplayer match. *Crackdown 3*'s demo wowed audiences with a look at its multi-player devastation – with Microsoft

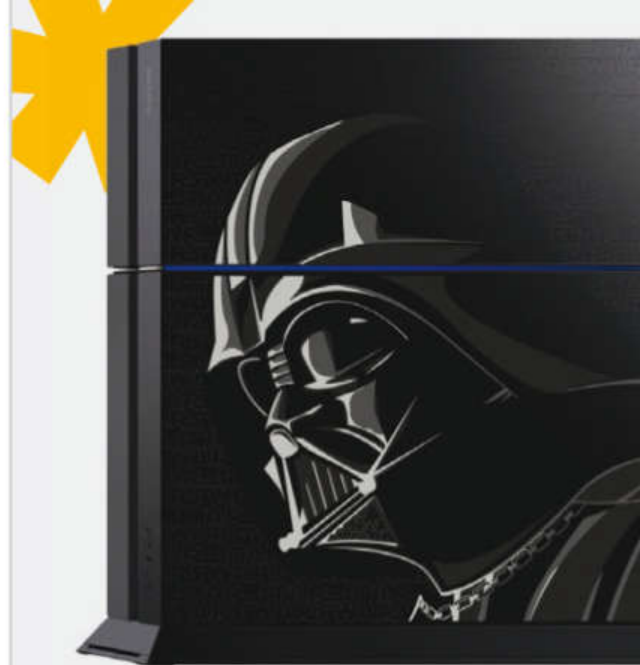
adding that it was only possible thanks to the power of the Xbox One's cloud-based computing. Halo studio 343 Industries concluded the show by announcing *Halo Wars 2*, which is being developed by Total War creators Creative Assembly.

Microsoft also revealed what's ahead for the Xbox One itself, including the announcement of over-the-air DVR functionality on the console. The company showed off a new Elite controller designed for professional gamers back at E3, but that isn't all it has in the works. At Gamescom, they revealed the returning chatpad accessory (\$34.99), which snaps onto Xbox One controllers and gives players a qwerty keyboard along with shortcuts for hardware functions such as recording video clips.

With Sony out, and Nintendo's presence essentially a formality, it was Microsoft's show to lose. Fortunately for Xbox fans, the company showed that even its E3 leftovers could hold their own.

EA and Blizzard held its own press conferences at the show as well. EA didn't pack in any game announcements, instead offering deeper dives into *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst*, *Need for Speed*, and *FIFA 16*. EA's yarn-inspired *Unravel* made an appearance, too, giving Europeans a chance to see the cute aesthetic that masks a





Disney Reveals More Gaming Goodness At Its D23 Event

Disney fans from around the globe gather at California's Anaheim Convention Center every year for the annual D23 event. This year, attendees learned more about its upcoming film and animation projects – and plans for new Star Wars-themed lands at its parks – as well as a slew of gaming-related news.

Sony revealed a new Star Wars Battlefront PlayStation 4 bundle that takes the console to the dark side. It includes a special Darth Vader-skinned console, an exclusive Vader-themed controller, and a copy of EA's shooter. It also comes with download vouchers for a quartet of old-school Star Wars games, with digital vouchers for Super Star Wars, Star Wars: Racer Revenge, Star Wars: Jedi Starfighter, and Star Wars Bounty Hunter.

Big Hero 6 captured hearts last year, and the animated film is getting its own themed world in the upcoming Kingdom Hearts III. Square Enix announced that Baymax and buddies will be appearing in the Square/Disney mashup.

On the Disney Infinity front, Disney Interactive gave players info on Disney Infinity 3.0's ultimate unlockable. Keeping with the Kingdom Hearts theme, dedicated players who unlock all of the Disney Infinity characters will be able to nab the series' keyblade weapon. ♦



tricky physics-based platformer. DICE showed off Star Wars Battlefront's new Fighter Squadron, which was playable on the showfloor. We were disappointed with how closely the TIE Fighters and X-Wings handled, as well as the mode's overreliance on cooldowns for basic abilities like firing lasers and performing dodge maneuvers.

Blizzard's big reveal was the latest World of Warcraft expansion, Legion. The 2016 release includes a new character class, the acrobatic demon hunter, and new artifact weapons that level as players progress. The expansion is set in an all-new continent, The Broken Isles, and it increases the level cap to 110. The company also unveiled new Overwatch maps and gave StarCraft 2 players a chance to check out the new Allied Commanders co-op mode.

Elsewhere at the show, the prevailing theme was getting new looks at familiar games. There were certainly exceptions, such as 2K Games' pre-Gamescom announcement of Mafia III, but for the most part the show was one of the final opportunities to see what developers have been up to in the months since E3 before many of the games ship later this year.

Attendees could get hands-on time with Rise of the Tomb Raider and explore one of the new tombs for themselves. Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege was a reminder of how important communication is in the tactical shooters; teams of writers who opted to stay quiet often found themselves quickly out of the action.

For in-depth looks at many of the big games from the show, take a look at our expanded coverage in the previews section. ♦



A Dozen Recent Mobile Games You Shouldn't Miss

Amid the glut of shovelware and exploitative monetization practices, the mobile gaming scene still plays home to some fantastic games every year. Here are 12 recent games worth trying on phone or tablet, with an eye towards thoughtful game design, beautiful art or presentation, and immersive experiences that don't draw you out of the fun with an overreliance on ads, questionable IAP, or other dubious practices.

by Matt Miller



2. THE EXECUTIVE

Developer: Riverman Media

Platform: iOS

A gentleman in a three-piece suit is up to any challenge, including confronting a horde of werewolves and other monsters when they invade the city, posing as the day-to-day personnel of the white-collar world. Acrobatically leaping through skyscrapers and flame-kicking anthropomorphic warhogs with carefully timed martial arts action is as wild as it sounds. The absurdity is backed up by immaculate controls, challenging enemy attack patterns, and an engaging leveling system, in this strangely fascinating mash-up of board-room culture and B-movie monster gags.



4. GALACTIC KEEP

Developer: Gilded Skull Games

Platform: iOS, Android

Bright colors splash across the character portraits, and dice roll across the screen in this homage to classic tabletop science fiction. Graph-paper maps serve as the visual backdrop as you guide your customized character through one adventure after the next, fighting gonzo alien creatures in turn-based encounters, and exploring unknown worlds as you go. Smartly paced battles demand attention and resource management, and the varied selection of heroes keeps things interesting each time you dive into the action.



1. YOU MUST BUILD A BOAT

Developer: EightyEight Games

Platform: iOS, Android

The sequel to the endlessly engaging 10000000 tells you almost everything you need to know in its own title. Rapidfire match-three gameplay demands speed, and the new addition of matching even as new blocks are falling into place makes things more frantic and fun. All the while, your boat gets more rambunctious and lively, as new monsters hop aboard to join the crew. Once you get into the flow, the biggest challenge is convincing yourself to take a break.



3. PRUNE

Developer: Joel McDonald

Platform: iOS

As close as you're ever likely to get to a digital take on the art of bonsai trees, Prune plays unlike anything else out there. The spare visuals and beautiful ambient music is likely to remind many players of thatgamecompany's Flower, and the eco-overtones of Prune's level progression do nothing to dispel the comparison. As your tree grows and branches across the screen, a swipe of your finger removes excess branches and shapes the tree so that it can blossom into the light. Deeply relaxing and thoughtful, Prune offers bite-sized moments of meditation rather than action or strategy.



5. SPLENDOR

Developer: Days of Wonder

Platform: iOS, Android

One of the best tabletop games of recent years has made a brilliant transition to the digital playspace. You are a merchant of the Renaissance, cornering the market on gemstones and attracting the eye (and prestige) of nobles. Seemingly simple mechanics become devilishly complex as you juggle available supply, growing your wealth, and tracking your opponents' planned acquisitions, in this elegant and addictive game of strategy for up to four aspiring merchants.



6. TRANSISTOR

Developer: Supergiant Games/Confetti Games
Platform: iOS

Transistor was celebrated as an indie success story upon its 2014 release, and it has received a stellar port to mobile. Players who have yet to explore the science-fiction city of Cloudbank should take the opportunity to dive in. You control Red, a young singer who has lost her voice. Her only companion is a mighty weapon called the Transistor, which speaks with the voice of her lost friend. Excellent combat mixes real-time and turn-based mechanics to stellar effect, and new touch-control options feel intuitive and responsive.



7. CHAOS RINGS III

Developer: Media.Vision/Square Enix
Platform: iOS, Android

While Square Enix continues to pump out remakes of its most popular old RPGs, its most compelling recent mobile release is a title developed specifically for mobile platforms. The turn-based combat and rich cast of characters is reminiscent of some of Square Enix's '90s RPG efforts, and remain open to trying out new systems and challenging its players to keep up with a complex system and deep world fiction. Like many mobile releases from the company, the latest Chaos Rings is expensive enough to deserve a mention of the price here (\$19.99 as of this writing), but be assured – a full JRPG epic is on offer, presented in the grand style we used to take for granted.



8. LOOT & LEGENDS

Developer: Dropforge Games
Platform: iOS

Loot & Legends is the mobile successor and evolution of the excellent PC-based Card Hunter, and dramatically overhauls many of the game's systems in the name of improved play and better mobile implementation. The result is a brilliant homage to old-school D&D tabletop games, but with a clever card game twist. Levels look like cardboard cut-outs lovingly crafted to lay out on a kitchen table on game night, but it's the highly tactical party-based combat that really steals the show.



9. HALO: SPARTAN STRIKE

Developer: 343 Industries/Vanguard Games
Platform: iOS, Windows Phone

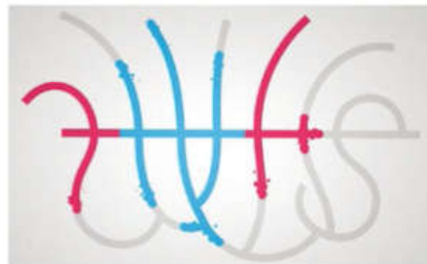
One of the most polished twin-stick style shooters on mobile also happens to be from one of gaming's most popular sci-fi franchises. Spartan Strike showcases a beautiful presentation of glowing weapon effects and potent explosions. Tight shooting mechanics use many of the series' signature weapons, but the game also manages to improve its predecessor's credit and weapon system for a more streamlined experience.



10. LEGEND OF GRIMROCK

Developer: Almost Human
Platform: iOS

You are prisoners granted freedom by royalty, but only if you can escape the confines of a massive dungeon complex filled with traps and monsters. Paying homage to classic PC RPGs like Ultima Underworld and Wizardry, Legend of Grimrock puts you in charge of an ill-equipped party of heroes and sets you loose into a grid-based first-person perspective dungeon. Great touch controls and smart inventory management make it easy to dive in, but be aware that the challenge level is extremely high if you hope to survive for long.



11. LINES THE GAME

Developer: Gamious
Platform: iOS

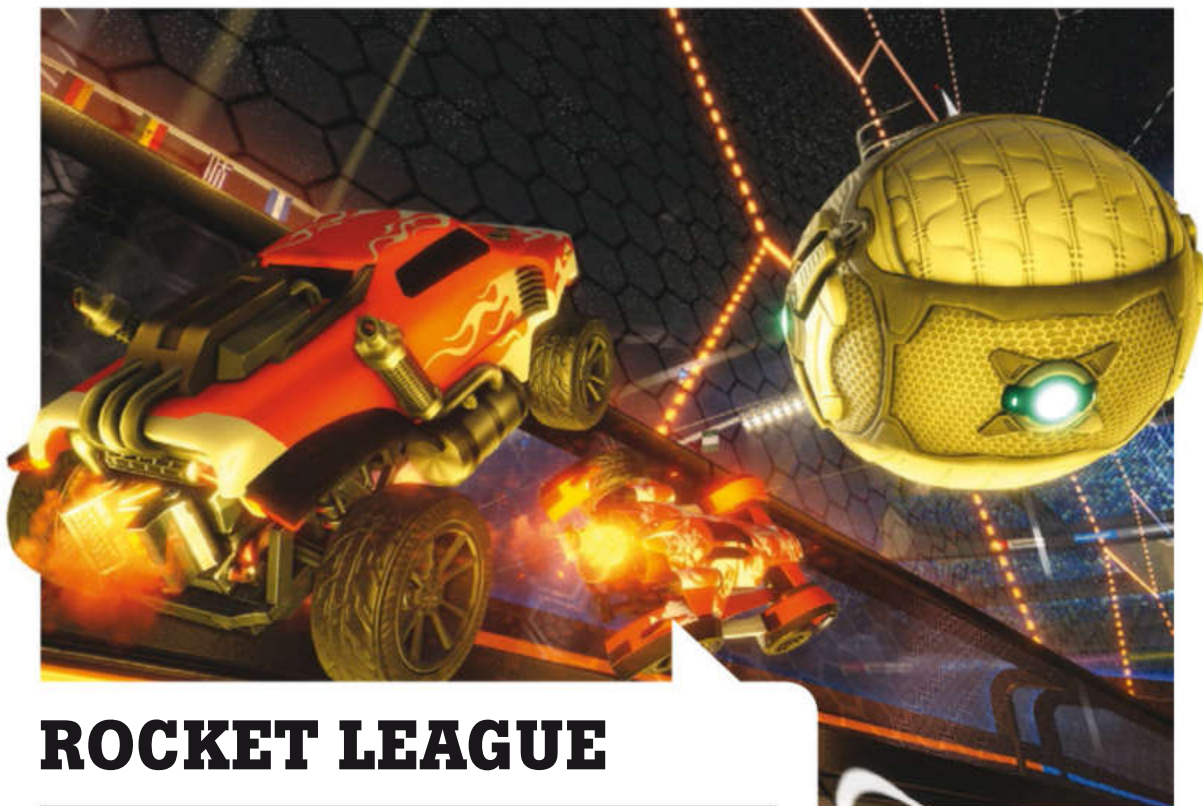
There's no fancy wrapping for this clever little puzzle game, in which you attempt to capture territory along various geometric shapes. Upon starting the game, it's hard to imagine how the concept could be so engrossing, since the entire gist of gameplay is about tapping a few times along the shape's lines to determine where your color will begin to spread. But as other colors compete for space, and more complex shapes arise, Lines becomes devilishly engaging.



12. FALLOUT SHELTER

Developer: Bethesda
Platform: iOS, Android

The wildly popular Fallout franchise gets a mobile entry as we wait for the upcoming Fallout 4. In this community simulator, you build out your underground bunker to withstand the attacks of bandits and deathclaws, all the while aiming to keep your vault dwellers happy, healthy, and making more babies. The cute Vault Boy-fueled aesthetic and smartly paced development are fun, and the timer-based process for progress is only a pain if you're in a rush to finish. 💎



ROCKET LEAGUE

Seemingly out of the blue, this summer the gaming world fell in love with cars playing soccer. We spoke with the founder of Psyonix, Dave Hagewood, about Rocket League's success and future. *by Ben Hanson*

What was it like in the studio when the game launched?

It was polarizing. On the one hand, we start to see the numbers go up like crazy, and on the other hand we're looking at our server network and are like, "Oh my god." We were pretty confident we could handle 40-50,000 players and it would be great if we had more than 10,000. By the end of the [first] week we had 183,000 concurrent players.

How important was being free on PlayStation Plus to the game's overall success?

Personally, I feel like the game would have been a success (at least to the standards that we were expecting) even without it, but I don't think that it would have been into the stratosphere like it is. We're up to five million players now, most of which come from PS Plus. It was about getting it in the hands of as many people as possible.

Does Sony give you a lump sum in the beginning or do you get paid every download?

We don't get paid every download, but that would be nice.

Seeing how successful it is, do you regret giving it away for free?

I would be lying if I said I don't think

about that, but there's no way to know. PlayStation has been a very, very key role in this whole thing...it seems to be what made it spark and take off.

Did you debate making it a free-to-play game and then selling cosmetic items?

We considered making it free-to-play. We've had experience with free-to-play doing well and free-to-play doing not so well...[but] anything that has a bad reputation we want to stay away from and just be that more traditional, nostalgic experience.

Is there any chance of this game coming to Xbox One?

All I can say is that we're interested in that.

Do you guys see Rocket League as a viable eSport?

Yes. We've been having those conversations with all kinds of organizations. We're in the process of trying to keep it from fragmenting too much – there's almost too many eSports organizations. We're jumping in head-first and figuring out the best way to do it.

How do you keep evolving the game without disrupting its simple beauty?

Some people are interested in it being a

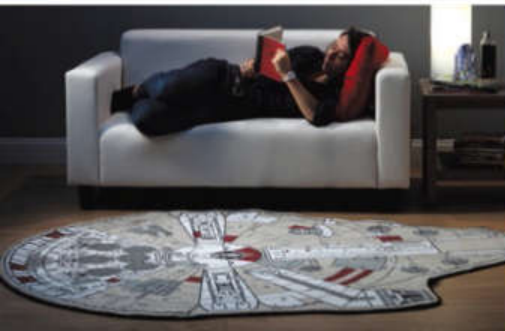
highly competitive sport, and we want to support that as much as possible, but we believe that we can totally add some really fun experiences, a lot of which were in the original game. Things like maps that aren't the standard rectangle field, modes where you couldn't cross [your] 50-yard line, a mode where instead of a ball we played with a crate. We're basically calling them "mutators," so you can mutate a match just like the old Unreal Tournament games that I have a background in. We're doing it very carefully; you're not just going to suddenly see 16 other game types. We want to give people the ability to customize a match for their friends and play a wackier version of the game...and we don't plan on charging money for those. For match-making, we're planning on having weekly or daily mutators...and then we can just cycle through them.

Is this game helping fund some of the studio's dream projects?

Absolutely. We've played this long game of working on other projects to fund our own, and we're really masters of our own destiny at this point. Pretty much all projects coming out of Psyonix now are going to be Psyonix originals. We want to add updates to [Rocket League], we want to add sequels to it and all of that, but we have a wide variety of game ideas here. We're very excited to develop some of our new projects and show everyone the other side of what Psyonix is capable of doing. 💎

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Creating The Fierce Women



Of The Witcher 3

How three disparate, strong-willed ladies brought more depth to Geralt's journey

by Kimberley Wallace



When most people think of *The Witcher*, they immediately think of its powerful antihero, Geralt of Rivia. However, he has three intriguing women at his side fighting the harsh realities of its brutal universe. The kind-hearted Triss, sarcastic Yennefer, and rebellious Ciri are all important to the narrative, and each has her own motivations and struggles to overcome a discriminatory society and the world's greater dangers. While CD Projekt Red could have kept the narrative centered on Geralt, instead it saw value in exploring the individual complexities of each woman. In the end, the writing team created three fascinating characters – so much so we couldn't resist finding out how they approached their arcs, giving all of them their own places to shine.

Going Beyond The Books

CD Projekt's *Witcher* series is based on the best-selling novels by Andrzej Sapkowski, a Polish writer often compared to J.R.R. Tolkien. Sapkowski laid the groundwork for all the characters in the *Witcher* universe, something that CD Projekt respects and tries not to wander too far from. The personalities have to match and fall in line with how the characters have been presented by Sapkowski. However, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* takes place after the books, forcing the writers to ask the question: How did the characters grow in the time that has passed since the novels?

Ciri, in particular, was a child at the start of the books and a teenager when they ended. CD Projekt Red had the task of showing her as a maturing woman. "With Ciri we had the most freedom and it was also the biggest challenge, because she is a very different character," says senior writer Jakub Szamałek. "Now, she's grown up; she's been through a lot of things so we wanted to create a character who is aware of her special place in the world, but who doesn't want to accept it."

For Triss and Yennefer, the personalities stayed on point from the books, but CD Projekt Red added new dimensions to them

by giving each unique struggles. Yennefer has always been a colder character, but her desperate search for Ciri brings out a more caring and motherly side to her. Whereas Triss finds herself caught up in a political struggle in which a new leader in Novigrad is persecuting mages. Her caring nature goes into overdrive, throwing her into a leadership role to help save their lives.

While CD Projekt Red gave each woman her own trials, a common thread brings them all together: their relationships with each other and Geralt. CD Projekt Red knew with the expansive game it planned to create it couldn't have the main plot be something abstract like killing a certain monster or about politics; the centerpiece had to be emotional. That's how Ciri became the link that would make all their paths cross.

Triss is like a sister figure to Ciri, while Geralt and Yennefer have a more parental relationship with her. "It had to be someone close to Geralt, and Ciri is without a doubt the most important character in the *Witcher* saga," Szamałek says. "We knew this would be the final installment in Geralt's adventures, so we felt that we had to bring her up and make her the key to the story to this final installment of Geralt's saga."

left to right: Ciri, Yennefer, and Triss

Writing Characters As People

It may seem like a no-brainer, but CD Projekt Red's core philosophy is to make sure every character has a place in the story. This extends to NPCs. "When creating characters, both major characters and really insignificant ones, we want to give them their own aims, goals, and ambitions," Szamalek says. "They're always up to something. They aren't there just for the player to interact with, they are always scheming and doing their own things."

This mantra extends to The Witcher 3's leading ladies. "For us, Triss, Yennefer, and Ciri just

are people, not plot devices," says writer Karolina Stachyra. "Our only consideration was to give each of them as much time in the quests as possible to show who they are and why they are so interesting and important for Geralt."

To CD Projekt Red, creating interesting characters means making them flawed and realistic. Similar to the moral ambiguity in the choices you make, characters also must reflect that. "We focus on creating interesting characters and if someone is an interesting person, he or she has to have shades of gray – because this is what makes us human," Stachyra says.



The Yennefer Challenge

Yennefer has a huge arc in Andrzej Sapkowski's Witcher novels, and CD Projekt Red was intimidated to tackle such a complex character in the games. "We avoided introducing her in the first two games partly because she was such an important character that we were afraid of bringing her to the picture," says senior writer Jakub Szamalek.

For Geralt's last big journey, CD Projekt Red finally got over its fear and brought her in, but she wasn't the easiest character to make players understand and like. "Yennefer is difficult character for many reasons," says writer Karolina Stachyra. "She's well known to the readers of the saga, and fans had their own expectation according to that character. We needed to face them, which is always very challenging. Second of all she is ironic and sarcastic, often hard to coexist with, and very smart (sometimes even impertinent), so it was another challenge to make her likeable."

"Yennefer is really a mean character in the books," Szamalek adds. "In the beginning, she seems to be a difficult character and you might even dislike her, but when you finish reading the books, you almost certainly end up liking her. The problem is we had to recreate this. We couldn't make Yennefer likeable from the first minutes of your interaction with her because it would make her seem and feel like a very different character from the book."

Stachyra says the team had intense discussions on whether or not to make her personality warmer, but ultimately decided against it because they wanted to stay true to what made her special – the part of her that Geralt loved the most. However, they also worked in scenes to show Yennefer's softer side, like when she sees Ciri at Kaer Morhen and runs and kisses her cheeks. "For someone so preoccupied with her appearances and with how she's perceived, you can see at this very moment she drops all the pretenses and her guard and she's basically herself," Stachyra says.

Szamalek thinks it's important that the lead characters' personalities add contrast against the harsh landscape and awful people in it, while still maintaining their own rough edges. "It's important that the characters you interact the most with are likeable, but that doesn't mean that they all have to be Mary Sues and they all have to be ideal, nice, warm, and cuddly."

Triss, Ciri, and Yennefer all have their likeable qualities, but they're far from idealized. Ciri can be reckless, Yennefer is detached, and Triss is sometimes too kind for her own good. These flaws enable CD Projekt to put them in interesting situations.

Triss isn't a natural born leader, but when the mages are being persecuted in Novigrad and no one steps up to protect them she steps into that role and must cope with the heavy responsibility. On the other hand, Yennefer aligns with unpredictable political leaders, letting her guard down all in the name of finding Ciri. These women don't exist merely for Geralt. While he's on his journey, they're having their own experiences, fighting their own battles.

Overcoming The Harsh World

The Witcher's world is grim and brutal. Similar to George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*, the backdrop is full of horrible circumstances and uncomfortable situations. CD Projekt Red has maintained Sapkowski's vision from his books, right down to the violent and shocking moments.

Sapkowski's creation was heavily influenced by Slavic mythology; the fantasy setting is in archaic times where outmoded attitudes in regards to women were prevalent and class divisions are ever present. Even more so, non-humans are not treated kindly, such as when we see Geralt getting called a "freak" or worse at times. When you enter this world, you must be prepared for the bleakness.

For some players, it's been hard to watch these primitive attitudes surface and seeing characters, women in particular, being treated poorly. "The world of The Witcher is a horrible place," Szamalek admits. "I'd never want to live there. It's full of violence, of racism, of sexism as well. The world is a grim place with all of these horrible things going on, but I think you'd have to have a lot of bad will to think this is how we as writers or developers of the game think that's how things should work out."

While CD Projekt Red is quick to say it's not an ideal world and it doesn't think what occurs in it is right, it does create strong characters who persevere in spite of these unjust circumstances for that very reason. Yennefer, Triss, and Ciri all hold important positions in the world and rise above the evil pitted against them. They're capable on and off the battlefield. Yennefer doesn't wait for Geralt; she runs ahead to find Ciri, using her talents in political scheming to find answers.





"Against this backdrop, we put characters that we sympathize with, that we like," Szamalek says. "These characters are often women. They have an opportunity to be important, both for the story of Geralt and be strong characters in their own right. They manage to overcome all the differences and prejudices inherent in this world."

From the beginning, CD Projekt Red has always wanted to remain true to Sapkowski's source material and show respect for it. For Szamalek and his writing team, it's been a tough balancing act. "We want to tell an emotional, grim story set in a morally bleak world and we didn't want to punch in kiddie gloves just because it's a video game," he says. "We didn't shy away from some controversies because it's easier or safer to do so. It's a game that can last for up to 200 hours,

and we haven't got solutions for everything. Sometimes we didn't quite strike the right tone and we've always acknowledged that we are not perfect and our games are not perfect, but overall we managed to tell a mature story which respects its characters even though they might end up in horrific circumstances."

Providing A Building Block

CD Projekt Red broke new ground in the RPG genre with its work on The Witcher franchise, innovating in areas of choice and mature storytelling. Not many games have challenged players with such distressing scenarios or mastered the art of ambiguous decisions. To buy into this world, you have to care about it; you need these characters and their plights to matter. The writing stands out for that very reason. The previous Witcher games may



Supporting And Empowering Ciri

[Warning: Spoilers ahead]

In The Witcher 3, your ending depends on how much you let Ciri grow as an individual during the journey. She spends a great portion of the journey running from her destiny, not entirely sure what she wants to do with her life. You as Geralt must help her ease into her special role, and to do that, you must listen closely to what she needs from you. "I think that what we did with Ciri is particularly empowering," says senior writer Jakub Szamalek. "Her story is basically about letting her make her own decisions and believing in her, so if you're overprotective and you think you know what's best for her, then she doesn't grow as a character and this leads to the unhappy ending. You [must] help her grow and spread her wings; Ciri is such an independent character, and you have to respect her independence in order to help her."

not have set a high bar with its female characters and their representations, but The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt takes big strides thanks to Triss, Ciri, and Yennefer. CD Projekt Red aims to continue writing intriguing female characters like them and only hopes to grow from here.

"It is very important to talk about gender issues within the game industry, and we are happy

to be part of the discussion," Szamalek says. "The fact that we have so much to talk about – this is why it's so important that we have strong female characters. It's indicative of a problem, that there aren't enough strong female characters. It should be natural that games have strong female characters. We are happy to provide a little building block toward that goal." ♦



Quotable

"No, I think the rest of the team might murder me if I said it without talking to them first."

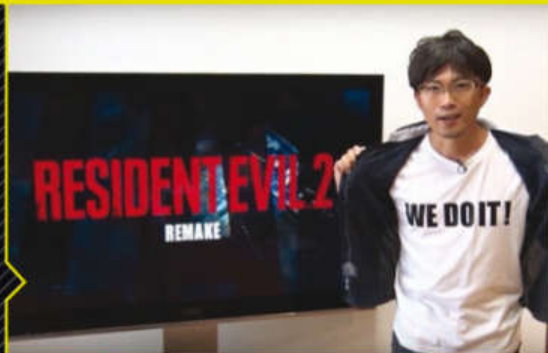


— **Dave Hagewood**, founder of Rocket League developer Psyonix, when we asked him if he could share some of the lore behind Rocket League.

The Good

RESIDENT EVIL 2

is getting remade thanks to the loud request of fans. Capcom asked fans if they were interested in a remake of the game, and the response was a resounding, "Yes!" No release date or details have been revealed about the project, but given how good the remake of the original was earlier this year, fans should be optimistic.



The Bad



MIGHTY NO. 9

developer Comcept (featuring Mega Man luminary Keiji Inafune) has received ire over the handling of the delay of Mighty No. 9 (shown) and the poor communication surrounding another Comcept Kickstarter title, Red Ash. These concerns were amplified in the last days of the failed Red Ash Kickstarter as investor Fuze funded the project off-site. This created confusion about where crowdfunding would be spent. Some backers believe Comcept tried to mute the delay of Mighty No. 9 into 2016 so as not to disrupt the Kickstarting of Red Ash. This confirmed other concerns about Red Ash being pitched before Mighty No. 9 was delivered.

The Ugly



photo from Time Magazine

OCULUS RIFT

creator Palmer Luckey graced the cover of an August issue of *Time Magazine*. While Luckey's picture on the cover didn't do him or virtual reality any favors, it was *Time's* article itself that came out looking the worst. Unable to resist an easy stereotype, author Joel Stein called Luckey a nerd who is "cheery and talks in normal sentences that are easy to understand." Stein continued, "He doesn't look like a guy who played Dungeons & Dragons so much as a character in Dungeons & Dragons." ♦

New Designs for Wii Remote Plus.

Available only at GameStop.



Compatible with these Wii U games and more!



Wii U

Nintendo

GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS™



TROVE

A fun-filled world overflowing with absurdity

by Daniel Tack

Trion Worlds' Trove is an unusual MMORPG, but it's a lot of fun. While it doesn't quite embrace all the systems associated with a traditional MMO in a post-World of Warcraft world, Trove finds its niche by embracing elements from open-world games with RPG components, like Minecraft and the often lamented Cube World, and tying the two different philosophies together to create colorful, fast-paced, and interesting experiences. You're not playing a core MMORPG, and you're not playing a building/crafting/survival game either, but something that falls between.

Trove's free-to-play model lets you start with a class of your choice from a ridiculous assortment of options. While many are based on fantasy archetypes, Trove's humorous versions of popular classes set the pace before you even begin playing. Classes like Candy Barbarians,


Neon Ninjas, and the Boomeranger (a class clearly inspired by Link, featuring boomerangs, bombs, and smashy urns) are not your everyday options. After selecting your class, Trove tasks players with a rather extensive tutorial that teaches the concepts of home development and crafting alongside actual adventuring and looting. You can unlock others classes later with acquired currency.

After your expansive and informative tutorial, you're free to start exploring the world with other players, zipping from adventure to adventure. This format feels similar to the "instant adventure" feature in Trion's core MMORPG, Rift, and it mostly works. You can join up and start diving into action immediately, though the combat sometimes gets confusing with so many pixels and particles lighting up the screen.

Whether you're a solo player or a raucous raider, you have things to do

at all levels of the game, and the focus is definitely on the fun. Trove doesn't take itself too seriously, and you shouldn't either. If you want to engage with high-level adventure content, that option is available, or you can just try to make the coolest base ever.

The world of Trove is filled with weird situations involving ludicrous dinosaurs and dragons. The comical take on many fantasy and pop-culture tropes works well in the world of boisterous blocks. Combat involves your standard MMORPG hotbar, but it's fast and more action-oriented. It also follows the modern trend of "fewer abilities, more impact" for your skills and items; you won't end up with your screen real estate taken over by hundreds of different icons.

On the con side, the game can feel grindy at times (what MMO doesn't?), so I recommend going into it with a group of friends to tackle more interesting fare than solo gameplay day after day. Veteran MMORPG players may balk at the small ability selection as well. Servers on launch were jam-packed and it was sometimes difficult to get through the queue line, but that issue seems to have been corrected. Those issues aside, I highly recommend trying Trove, as there's very little stopping you from doing so. You should know almost immediately if the eclectic amalgamation of game design concepts works for you. It may not be a hardcore fantasy MMORPG, but we have plenty of those already. Trove is a refreshing, different approach to the genre. 



Summer Conventions Bring Indie Darlings

With the season of big conventions like E3, Gamescom, and PAX Prime behind us, we've come away with a fantastic array of upcoming indies to look forward to playing. Here are three that really captured our attention.

Necropolis

Necropolis comes to us courtesy of the fine folks at Harebrained Schemes, the same team behind the Shadowrun reboot and the upcoming Battletech revival. I'm increasingly fascinated as I learn more about this roguelike, third-person adventure, which feels in every way like a procedurally generated love letter to the Dark Souls and Bloodbornes of the world. You're an adventurer exploring the long-abandoned sanctum of the great wizard, Abraxis, and your only company is the unhinged ranting of the maze's magical caretaker, the Brazen Head. Weapons, armor, and loot of all kinds are ripe for the taking in the angular architecture of the dungeon, and combat feels fast and deadly. Harebrained Schemes tells me it has incorporated 32 distinct monster varieties, 60 weapons, and a huge number of distinct traps, potions, and acquirable magic traits for your explorer.

I love the visual variety in character styles they've squeezed out of the minimalistic and sharp-lined art style, and the playthroughs I've witnessed genuinely change things up as one moves from room to room, including moving platforms, devious drops, and constant treasure chests. I'm also intrigued by the studio's effort to inject a narrative and fictional background to the dungeon that reveals itself over multiple playthroughs. I can't wait to die repeatedly in the final version, targeting PC, Mac, and Linux early next year. » **Matt Miller**

Fragments of Him

SassyBot Studios' Fragments of Him explores the lives of three different characters dealing with the aftermath of an unexpected death of an important person to them, Will. You see how all three characters attempt to cope and remember Will. Think of it like a point-and-click adventure where you click on objects, but you can also walk around the room in first-person. This creates a feeling like you're on the outside, looking in at these families. "You're like the mind guiding the character and sometimes the mind wanders off," says designer Mata Haggis. The three different relationships you explore are Will's ex-girlfriend from college, his grandmother, and his current significant other, Harry. You watch characters interact in their different environments and reminisce about Will through objects and places that remind them of him.

In many ways, you're just learning about a man's life and seeing the impact he had on others. The majority of the gameplay focuses on walking around and clicking on meaningful objects in the environment, seeing Will's life from these different perspectives. The game isn't meant to be a sad tale about death, but instead sends a message about cherishing people and the memories we have of them. Fragments of Him is due out in early 2016 for PC and Xbox One.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

We Happy Few

We Happy Few is developed by Compulsion Games, the team behind Contrast. It has already turned heads for its similarity to BioShock's art style, but this third-person survival game has more than an interesting face. Set in a bonkers, drugged-out Dystopian City in 1964, people are just a little too happy, as the face-painted locals are on a drug called Joy and are hellbent on going after anybody who doesn't conform, known as "downers."

You must survive by finding food and water and crafting weapons to protect you during your trek. The map is procedurally generated and you can unlock multiple characters to play through different stories. To get around the crowds, you can either sneak around them or use antics like crafting clothes to fit in. You can even take drugs to see a rainbow-filled world where no one will attack you for a short while. You can use brute force against them and stealth attacks, but these are best used on the occasional straggler. Trying to make one's way through the town is thrilling as there's a lot of tension, especially once the "happy" people spot you and bolt in pursuit. You're thinking just as much as you're being caught off guard. We Happy Few launches in June 2016 on Xbox One and PC. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Looking for more independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, previews, and reviews. For more in this issue, read our reviews of *King's Quest Chapter I: A Knight To Remember* (p. 86) *Volume* (p. 87), and *Galak-Z: The Dimensional* (p. 89).

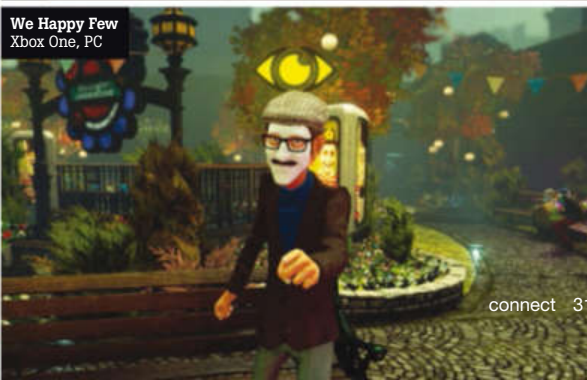
Necropolis
PC, Mac, Linux



Fragments of Him
Xbox One, PC



We Happy Few
Xbox One, PC



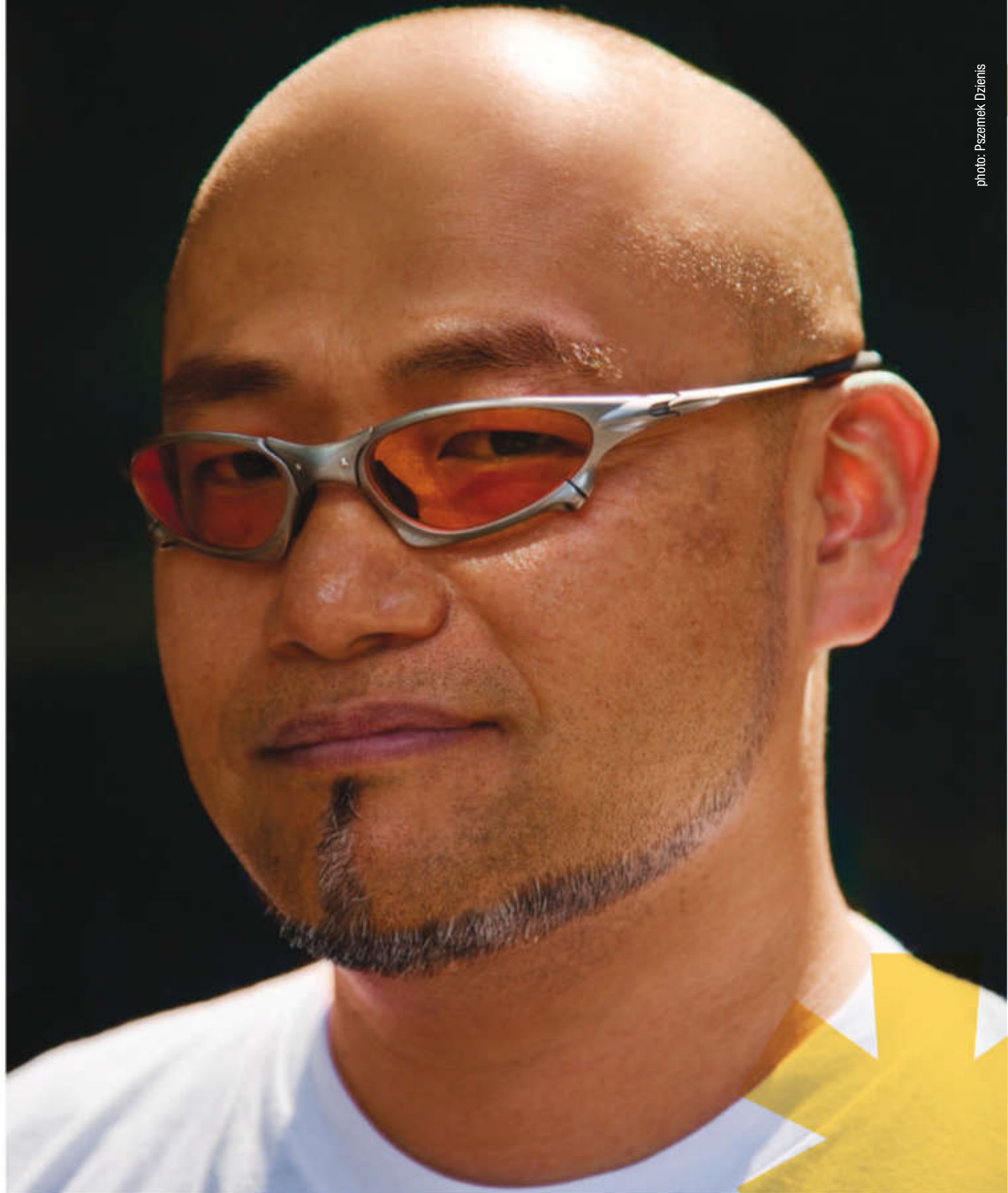


photo: Pzamek Dzientis

Brutally Honest Commentary

Hideki Kamiya is one of the most revered Japanese developers in the industry. From his work on games like *Resident Evil 2*, *Okami*, and *Bayonetta*, to his popular antics on Twitter, the Platinum Games director oozes charisma and is never afraid to tell it like it is.

You've been in the industry over 20 years now. What keeps you wanting to make games?

It goes back to when I first started at Capcom. I consider Shinji Mikami a mentor, because he taught me

the foundation of what it is to create games. It's not the know-how or the approach, but it is truly the belief of, "If you're going to create something, then you have to believe in that idea and you have to pull through." I've been

very fortunate that I've had supporters and people who have provided me with an environment to create what I believe in to the point where I am satisfied. I'm not only very fortunate, I'm very thankful.

Who are some of the people that you look up to in the games industry?

Of course, Shinji Mikami is one of them. Another person would be Hideo Kojima. When I was in high school, he released *Snatcher* and presented himself as director. At that time, there really wasn't a sense of a game director or producer compared to the film industry. It just felt like, "Wow. This is actually a structure or a formation that happens in the process of creating a game." That was eye-opening to me.

Going back to Mikami-san, in the early days, they didn't have that game-director structure at Capcom either. Mikami-san is the first person at Capcom who rose to earn that title as a game director. The way that Capcom operates now is something that Mikami-san created the path for, and I just happened to be the one person who followed it and became a director at Capcom.

One more person I want to mention here is a former colleague who entered Capcom around the same time: Shu Takumi, the creator of *Ace Attorney*. We're still friends and very close. There's something about the *Ace Attorneys* that he directs that have the Takumi-san stamp on it. Whether it's the dialogue, the direction, or the nuances, you know that it was him that made it. Going back to Kojima-san, *Metal Gear* would not be *Metal Gear* if it weren't made by Kojima-san.

How do you feel about *Metal Gear* potentially continuing without Kojima?

I don't know what Hideo Kojima's true feelings are, so this is purely my personal thoughts. There are two things. One is if I look at Kojima-san as a creator, then I feel like once the *Metal Gear* world was introduced to everyone, the game industry saw the success and how much potential this series has. This leads to an enormous amount of pressure that a creator ends up putting on to himself and the team to keep that franchise alive and evolve it. So from a creator's standpoint, I feel as if perhaps this will be a moment of release in terms of not being in that pressure-cooker. I'm thinking this is perhaps going to be a path into creating something brand new, so maybe that is something he is looking forward to.

From a fan perspective, obviously, you have devoted so much time into the series that you love the world, the characters, everything about it. If Kojima-san is not going to be involved in the next *Metal Gear*, then I just feel very sad.

What trends in the industry would you like to see go away, and how would you like to see it evolve in the future?

I've been fortunate to have colleagues, partners, and an environment provided to make my ideas happen. *Scalebound* is a very large-scale team, but I've also worked on titles that were more compact. But in the last decade or so, the way that games are developed has demanded large teams, and everything has grown out of proportion. There are other creators who probably have not been given that opportunity to make their ideas come to reality.

On one hand, you feel like games are fun, but this is a business at the end of the day. A lot of companies have become risk averse to very big budget titles or large-scale projects. In that sense, it just feels like for some people, there is nowhere to go. But as we all know, with a foundation or platform like crowdfunding or the effort to support indie developers, there is an outlet now for those creators to express their passion and their creativity.

Right now the Japanese video game scene is interesting in that it's not as console-focused as North America. Would you ever consider doing anything for mobile?

I would not want to have to make games for mobile...at least, for now. I have so much fun making games for console. If I had it my way, I would want take a time machine and go back to the '80s and make games for either arcades or Famicom (NES). That's where my heart is, so I don't see myself doing [mobile] right now.

You've earned a cult status on Twitter being unabashed about dealing with stupidity. Are you really frustrated or are you just having fun with it?

When I started Twitter in Japanese, I told myself that because there's a limitation of how much you can say that I would lose all this "formality." Obviously if I need to write something for our company blog or do press interviews, I speak in this manner. However, on Twitter, it's like "pub talk," sometimes talking trash. When you go out to the bar, you have a few drinks, talk it out, and you go to sleep and kind of forget the next day. I wanted to feel like I was closer to my fans – that we could have just a very casual conversation.

Now that I have these non-Japanese-speaking followers talking to me in English and I have a limited capacity of my English skills, I don't really always know what I'm saying. I'm just doing my best to respond in the best English

that I know, and sometimes it might not fully indicate the intent.

Why did you decide to start blocking people and tagging them with your infamous "BLOCKED?" tweets?

Part of my original policy was that I was not going to block anyone. Maybe it's a bit a cultural thing and that we're speaking the same native language, but with Japanese fans I have probably not blocked that many. They're either very shy, conservative, or very careful with how they make their comments or ask their questions.

Whereas, most of the foreigners are very direct and sometimes they poke me in the wrong way. On top of that, it seems to me that the Japanese users actually read a lot of my past tweets. To non-Japanese fans, it's a matter of, "I'm going to tweet something at Kamiya, and I just want to know what he says to my tweet." Everyone starts to ask the same questions over and over again, and it just got to a point where it was like, "You know? This is enough. I'm going to block you." I didn't want to, but it was just getting out of control. It's not worth the time and it's just easier to block that person. But even if I block someone, if you politely ask me to unblock you, I will always unblock you.

What made you want to take up the challenge of putting four-player co-op into *Scalebound*?

When *Scalebound* was pitched to Microsoft, there was much interest on the Microsoft side for this as something that really expands the gameplay. So that's where it started; it wasn't necessarily a hard push from our side, but it quickly evolved into, "It's a great opportunity and we don't really have experience in something as grandiose as this." It just sounded like this is a good challenge and we would not be able to do this on our own, only with the support of the Microsoft team.

We're not quite there yet to discuss details, but what I can say is that at the end of the demo you saw that you were all facing the same boss character and you were meeting up with three other Drew characters and partner dragons. The setting and backdrop will provide answers to why we're doing this, but there is a good reason for why and how it's integrated into the story.

What can we expect from you and Platinum Games in the future?

Personally speaking, Platinum Games is obviously working on a lot of projects, but what we can hopefully do with *Scalebound* is create a game that becomes the pillar of the studio. That will also allow us to take on lots of smaller projects that are challenging and interesting and really expand our horizons. ✨

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1994

Hideki Kamiya gets his first job in the industry at Capcom, joining the *Resident Evil* team and meeting his mentor, Shinji Mikami

1996

Kamiya is appointed director of *Resident Evil 2* and looks at it as getting a second chance after the failure of the unreleased *Resident Evil 1.5*

2001

Devil May Cry, Kamiya's first original IP, releases to much fanfare, establishing a powerful new series for Capcom. The franchise sells more than 10 million copies worldwide

2004

Clover Studio, an independent Japanese studio and subsidiary of Capcom, is founded. Kamiya joins and starts work on *Viewtiful Joe*

2006

The cult-hit *Okami*, which Kamiya directed, releases. The game wins acclaim from critics and a dedicated fanbase, but it isn't a commercial success

2006

A few months after *Okami* launches, Kamiya forms Platinum Games with Japanese developers Shinji Mikami and Atsushi Inaba

2009

Kamiya works with Sega and launches *Bayonetta*. This is the first time he returns to a previous genre, capitalizing on his flair for stylish action. *Bayonetta* is so well received, it later gets a sequel on Wii U

2014

Kamiya announces he's working on Xbox One exclusive *Scalebound*, the first time he's worked with a foreign publisher like Microsoft. The action/RPG is due out in 2016



Windows

Windows 8 was almost universally hated, but there were some good ideas drowning under that sea of colorful boxes. Windows 10 takes the best concepts – such as touchscreen integration and easy access apps – and smooths out the experience for those who still like to use a mouse and keyboard.

One of Windows 10's most noticeable changes is a more moldable start menu that allows you to easily drag and change its size before dropping in your favorite applications for easy access. The OS's multiple desktops helped me keep my work and play spaces organized. I also appreciated Windows 10's Action Center, which acts like a mobile device's notification center, keeping you informed about your computer and ensuring all your applications remain up to date.

Windows 10 also comes packaged with Edge and Cortana. Edge is a new Web browser that's faster and slicker than Microsoft's old Internet Explorer, and the program seems like good competition for Google Chrome. Meanwhile, Cortana is Microsoft's much-hyped personal assistant based off Halo's iconic A.I. Like her Windows Phone counterpart, you can issue both written or verbal commands to Cortana to have her check your calendar, give you the weather forecast, or search the Web for random trivia (via Bing, of course). Both pieces of software are

nifty, and I can see myself using them more and more as I get used to the new OS.

Windows 10 is also a boon to gamers, allowing you to stream games to your PC from any Xbox One on your network. We experienced a few hiccups on our home Wi-Fi, but a wired connection that wasn't burdened by a lot of other activity worked great. Microsoft's new OS also takes games you bought via Steam, Xbox Live, or any other source and pools them into one centralized hub. The My Games list is easy to navigate, and it should be a handy one-stop shop for gamers who do a lot of PC gaming.

It would take a long time to exhaustively cover all of Windows 10's improvements, but our impressions of Microsoft's new OS are extremely positive. If you have a Windows 7 or 8 machine, there is almost no reason not to migrate to 10. But even if you have to pay for Windows 10, there are still several reasons to upgrade.

SUPERB



\$ 119 (free upgrade for Windows 7 & 8 users); | microsoft.com

by Ben Reeves

1



1 Star Wars: The Black Series

Hasbro finally has some new faces to add to its high-end line of Star Wars Black figures. This series of highly detailed six-inch figures now includes characters from the upcoming film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* like Finn, Rey (packaged with BB-8 droid), Kylo Ren, Stormtrooper, and some dork called Chewbacca. The crown jewel of the line is the new Special Forces Tie Fighter. Built to scale with the figures, this Tie Fighter's cockpit can seat two six-inch characters. What you have them do once they are in there is your own business.

\$169 (Tie Fighter), \$19.99 (figures) | hasbro.com

2 The Force Awakens Silk Touch Throws

Watching trailers for J.J. Abrams' upcoming *Star Wars* Episode VII feels like wrapping yourself in a warm blanket, but if you're looking to cloak your self in hardcore fandom, check out these specially licensed *The Force Awakens* blankets. The Northwest Company's unique manufacturing process produced fabric designs that are clearer than most throws and still feel incredibly soft. Both of these throws measure 46 inches by 60 inches.

\$29.99 | thenorthwest.com



2



THE FLICKER MEN BY TED KOSMATKA

A theoretical quantum physicist makes a startling discovery that seems to prove the existence of a human soul, igniting a struggle between scientists and theologians. He soon finds himself evading a group of shadowy figures who believe he knows too much.

\$27.00
tedkosmatka.us

IT FOLLOWS

In one of the scariest movies of the year, a young woman discovers that there is someone – or something – slowly tracking her every move. As this supernatural force follows her across the city, she frantically works with friends to discover an escape for this ever-encroaching horror.

\$29.99
itfollowsfilm.com

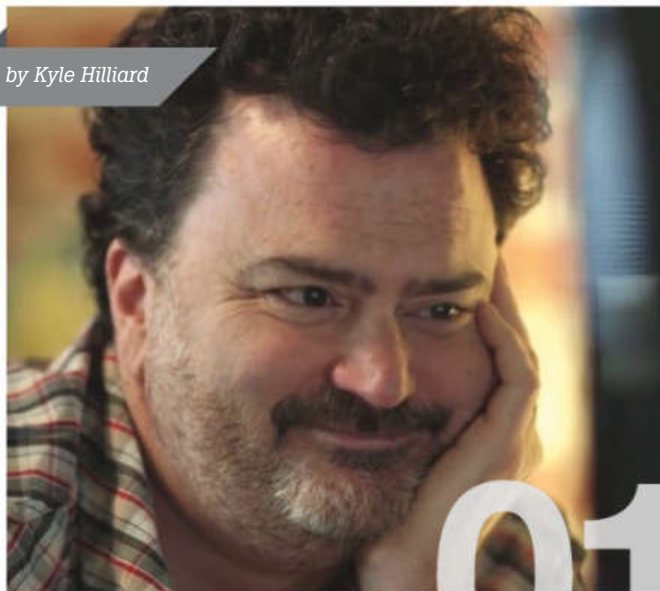
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDY OF THE SITH'S REVENGE: STAR WARS PART THE THIRD BY IAN DOESCHER

The curtain rises on the climactic conclusion of George Lucas' space epic filtered through the lens of the Elizabethan era's greatest bard. The house of Skywalker falls as a once-heroic knight is transformed into a dastardly villain in a version of the prequels we actually enjoyed.

\$14.95
quirkbooks.com/sithsrevenge

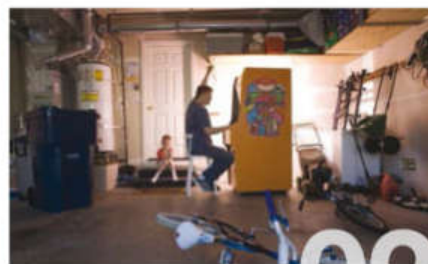
Video Game Documentaries

by Kyle Hilliard



Double Fine Adventure (2012)

With its Kickstarter adventure, Double Fine championed a new form of game funding. This documentary of the process is a must-watch for those interested in the art of game creation. It treats the good, bad, and ugly side of development all with the same unfiltered eye.



King Of Kong: A Fistful Of Quarters (2007)

This story of two competitive men (one more likable than the other) and their ongoing fight for the highest score in Donkey Kong is a timeless and interesting drama worth a watch whether you play games or not.



Indie Game: The Movie (2012)

At a time when indie games were finding their lucrative footing amongst triple-A markets, *Indie Game* followed the creators of Super Meat Boy, Fez, and Braid as they detailed their process and the difficulty inherent to going it alone.



Atari: Game Over (2014)

Part documentary about the collapse of Atari, part documentary about digging through landfill trash, *Atari* offers a look at the most notable video game failure in history. It also redeems E.T. game designer Howard Scott Warshaw.



Chasing Ghosts: Beyond The Arcade (2007)

A more educational look at the fascination behind setting high scores on classic arcade machines, *Chasing Ghosts* covers some of the same ground as *King of Kong*, but from a different, more analytical angle.



Minecraft: The Story Of Mojang (2012)

Shot while Markus "Notch" Persson was still fully dedicated to Minecraft, *The Story of Mojang* tracks the surge of popularity behind the game while also highlighting why it has become a staple in popular culture.



Grounded: The Making Of The Last Of Us (2013)

The Last of Us was a difficult game to make. It had a radically different tone than Naughty Dog's previous work and was set in an original universe. *Grounded* shows every aspect of the development at nearly every level of creation.



I Am Street Fighter (2013)

Examining the Street Fighter phenomenon by looking at its history and speaking to its creators and fans, *I Am Street Fighter* serves as a celebration of the popular fighting series and its relatively recent resurgence in popularity.



The Sprint (2014)

Both studios that have worked on the Halo series shroud their work in secrecy, but not with *The Sprint*. Its production value lacks compared to modern documentaries, but it's the closest cameras have ever looked at the development of a Halo game.



Free To Play (2014)

Valve's eSports documentary follows three top Dota 2 players as they compete in a \$1 million tournament. It falls short of fully exploring the ever-expanding world of professional gaming, but it tells a compelling story about its three subjects. 🎮



06 Rock Band 4



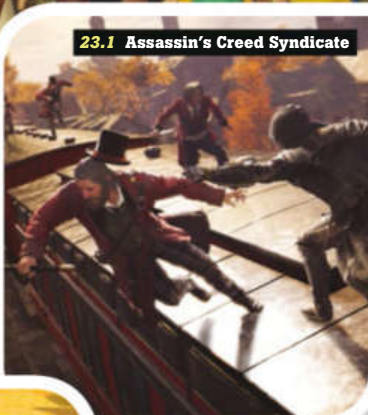
06 Transformers: Devastation



13 Dragon Quest Heroes



07.2



23.1 Assassin's Creed Syndicate



24



14



16.2 Yoshi's Woolly World

October

06 New Releases

- › Degenki Bunko: Fighting Climax (PS3, Vita)
- › Disgaea: Alliance of Vengeance (PS4)
- › Rock Band 4 (PS4, Xbox One)
- › Transformers: Devastation (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, PC)

07.1 Arrow And Flash Return

The second season of *The Flash* begins today on The CW. *Arrow* returns a day later on the same network. CBS is also airing the first episode of *Supergirl* on October 26.

07.2 Batman And Robin: Eternal

DC Comics' famed weekly series returns for a second year. James Tynion IV and Scott Snyder are the showrunners for this yearlong weekly series. Batman, Robin, and Dick Grayson find themselves battling a mysterious new foe.

09 New Releases

- › Chibi-Robo Zip Lash (3DS)
- › Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection (PS4)

13 New Releases

- › Dragon Quest Heroes (PS4)
- › The Talos Principle (PS4)

14 Invincible Iron Man

Following the events of this summer's *Secret Wars*, Brian Michael Bendis is bringing a new Iron Man (and armor) to Marvel's reinvented comic-book universe. The first and second issues of *The Invincible Iron Man* launch this month.

16.1 MLG Finals

Watch the world's best Dota 2 and Call of Duty players compete for cash prizes in the MLG Finals. The event starts today and runs through the weekend at the New Orleans Theater.

16.2 New Releases

- › Yoshi's Woolly World (Wii U)

20 New Releases

- › Dragon Ball Z: Extreme Butoden (3DS)
- › Guitar Hero Live (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360, Wii U)
- › Tales of Zestiria (PS4, PS3, PC)

23.1 New Releases

- › Assassin's Creed Syndicate (PS4, Xbox One)
- › The Legend of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes (3DS)

23.2 The Last Witch Hunter & Jem And The Holograms

What do Michael Caine, Vin Diesel, Rose Leslie, and Elijah Wood have in common? They are all great actors who will profoundly regret starring in today's theatrical release, *The Last Witch Hunter*. It could be worse – they could be in today's other movie, *Jem and the Holograms*. This might be a "stay at home and watch Netflix" kind of night.

24 Shattered Empire

J.J. Abrams' film, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, is two long months away, but Marvel Comics is doing its part in making that time fly by a little faster with

Star Wars: The Journey to the Force Awakens comic book. The final issue of this canonical series launches today, and should answer many questions as to what happened between *Return of the Jedi* and the new film.

27 New Releases

- › Halo 5: Guardians (Xbox One)
- › WWE 2K16 (PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360)

30 Scouts Guide To The Zombie Apocalypse

Despite years of zombie-themed movies, books, and TV shows, audiences can't get enough of the walking dead. Today's release, *Scouts Guide to the Zombie Apocalypse*, might finally be the movie that makes America say "no more!" The humor and premise make Adam Sandler's work seem high-brow.

31 League Of Legends World Championship

The grand finals to this year's League of Legends World Championship airs online today. Since the event is held at 12 p.m. in Berlin, Germany, you'll need to get up at 7 a.m. PT to watch it. ♦

2015

THE MAN BEHIND THE MADNESS

*Inside the mind of Dark Souls III
creator Hidetaka Miyazaki*

The Souls series has captivated gamers with an eclectic mix of dark atmosphere, challenging encounters, and deep storylines that require massive exploration.

Behind the Souls games is Hidetaka Miyazaki, who rose from programmer to president at From Software over the course of the Souls titles. Miyazaki unveils the nuances of Dark Souls III, from massive changes to the magic system to his approach to the latest entry.

BY
DANIEL TACK



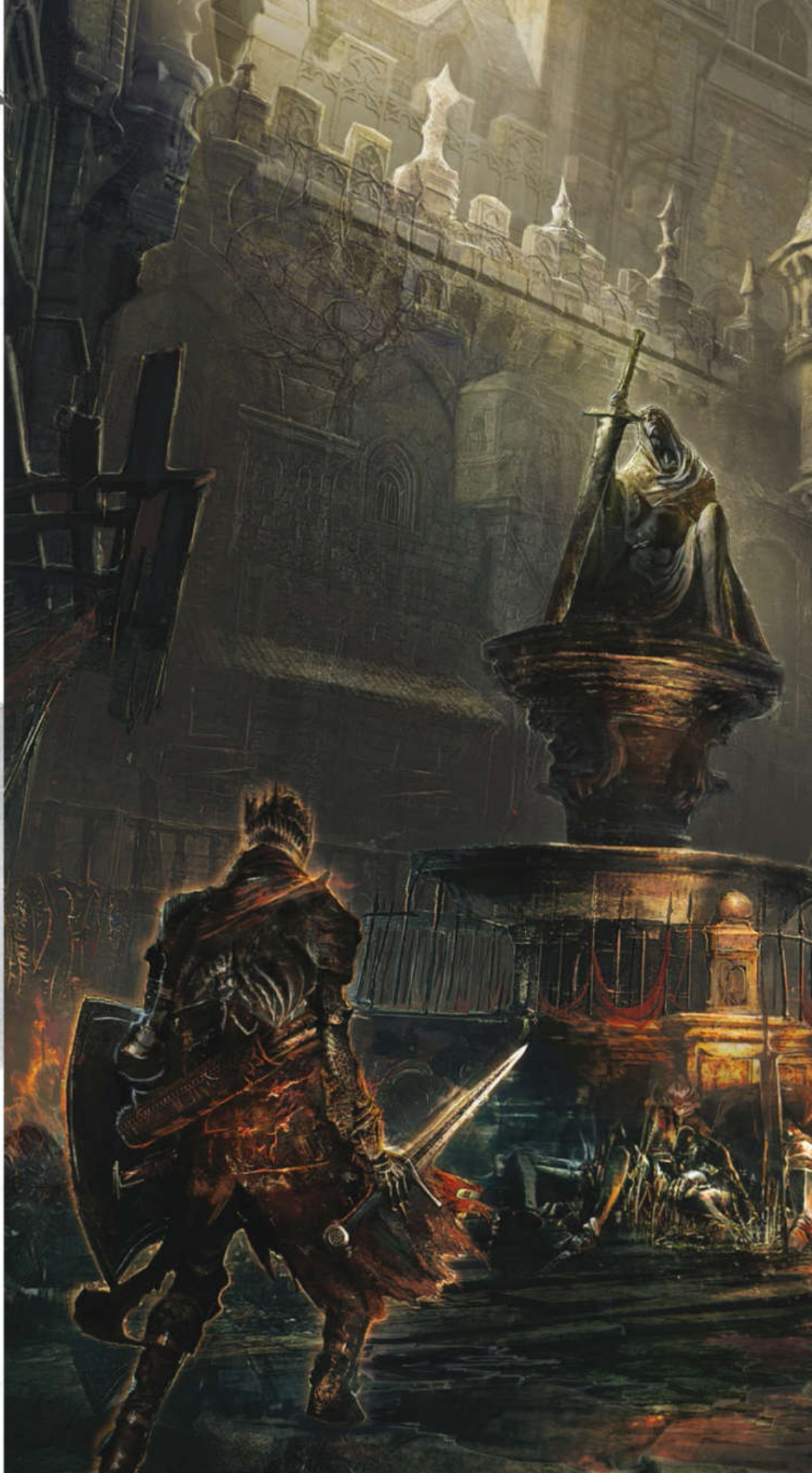
» **PLATFORM**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **STYLE**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(Online TBA)

» **PUBLISHER**
Bandai Namco

» **DEVELOPER**
From Software

» **RELEASE**
Spring 2016





THE UNLIKELY FRANCHISE

The Souls series officially began with *Demon's Souls*, which garnered a hardcore but niche following when Atlus brought it to North American shores. But the roots of the series go much deeper into From Software's history. From its first title in 1994, *King's Field*, the company's forte has always been dark fantasy action/role-playing. The *King's Field* series (and other similar From Software titles like *Shadow Tower*) didn't catch on with Western audiences, but *Demon's Souls* proved to be the right game at the right time. While many titles in 2009 were trending toward handholding tutorials, casual difficulty settings, and linear crafted experiences, *Demon's Souls* offered gamers a challenging experience with almost no direction at all. With very little explanation of systems or guidance, players were expected to explore and discover things on their own; finding their own methods to battle difficult bosses and unlock hidden secrets.

Communities formed over these discoveries, and when *Dark Souls* launched in 2011 the series was in the spotlight for the first time. Like *Demon's Souls* before it, *Dark Souls* became a critical darling, and when *Dark Souls II* came around in 2014 it hit the high-water mark for the series in terms of both sales and critical reception. To date, the *Dark Souls* franchise has shipped more than eight million copies.

From Software followed *Dark Souls II* up with this year's *Bloodborne*, a game that shares most of its traits with its predecessors, which currently sits at a 92 on Metacritic and cracked one million sales after just two months on the market on a single platform, the PlayStation 4. While it's not officially a Souls game, Miyazaki's mind and mechanics stand out as hallmarks of the horrific jaunt through Yharnam that's slightly more accessible than the titles before it, eliminating some of the player choices involved in character builds and removing the "hollowing" death penalty from *Dark Souls II* or loss of humanity from *Dark Souls*.

Dark Souls III continues the trend toward accessibility (not to be confused with difficulty – *Dark Souls III* will be just as hard as its predecessors), but maintains important factors that distinguish itself from *Bloodborne*, like build differentiation and player options. "The *Bloodborne* team and *Dark Souls III* teams are different, so [there is] no direct relationship, but elements such as the action speed and game-play elements that worked well in *Bloodborne* are things we wanted to bring over to *Dark Souls III*," Miyazaki says. "The action speed and controllability felt good when developing *Bloodborne*, and was an element that influenced the tuning and adjustments made in *Dark Souls III*. By developing *Bloodborne*, it was a good opportunity to realize again the good elements of the *Dark Souls* series. Examples are the variation on character types that can be created and the role-playing elements that aren't available in *Bloodborne*. This helped us to understand the key elements, and enhance them further to really capitalize on the features that make *Dark Souls* unique."

INSIDE THE MIND OF MIYAZAKI

Given the dungeon crawls through damp poisonous hells Miyazaki puts players through, one might expect a misshapen, shambling hermit that oozes venom with every breath. Instead, the cheery, animated Miyazaki displays an enthusiastic, almost bubbling personality, gushing about his favorite aspects of everything from tabletop games to curry rice. That's right – Miyazaki loves to cook.

"It's like playing an RPG," Miyazaki says about his hobby. "I like cooking by taking time, paying attention to all details, gathering the proper equipment, and taking all steps necessary to create something great. The more time and care that is spent, the better the food becomes. Curry rice is my favorite to make."

Miyazaki's unassuming office at From Software reflects his love of games and lore, stacked high with shelves containing books and board games (with a copy of *Arkham Horror* that looks like it was from the first run in 1987), a meeting table

overflowing with stacks of Magic: The Gathering cards and a wayward *Dungeons & Dragons* manual, and a whiteboard with the frantic scribbles of an impromptu design meeting.

Miyazaki's presidential abode isn't a palatial barrier between himself and the production team, but rather a cozy nook that exudes all of the influences that go into the warped worlds of the Souls titles. Miyazaki is unguarded as he speaks about his passions, often going quiet in thought for a few moments before beginning a torrential, enthusiastic rant about a favorite level or feature.

Despite the grotesque terrors and uncompromising difficulty that Miyazaki is known for, the director says it's all about making the player happy in the end. "For me, difficulty is a tool to express the challenge in the game, and the overcoming of the challenge is what we want players to experience," he says. "I want to have the game be worth something, and one of those elements is the satisfaction of overcoming the challenges. The difficulty is one of the tools



DESIGNING DARK SOULS

The creation of the Souls games always begins in the mind of From Software president Hidetaka Miyazaki. "I first explain all of my ideas to my designers either verbally, waving my hands in the air, or using a whiteboard," Miyazaki says. "Once I fully explain my ideas and concept for the venues, I have my designers immediately start creating 3D box models to visualize my ideas. From there, we start modifying and adjusting to make things work."

"We rarely create using paper blueprints. Once the model layouts are completed, we may draw them out for debugging purposes, but at step one, everything is created using 3D block models. The blueprinting format is so limiting, it limits the imagination and creative freedom for good

game-level designs."

Miyazaki's approach to go directly to 3D modeling allows creators infinite freedom right from the start, to better visualize and create the zones and worlds ripped from his imagination.

"This is another reason why I no longer directly use 3D modelling on my own," Miyazaki says. "We try to apply freedom to our team so that we can fulfill what I want created, but at the same time have the potential of surpassing my imagination with the help of my team members. I personally love level designing, and by imagining everything in my mind and having my team to visually create this, it expands the outcome of the venues. Level-design processes are staggered for each game. For

Dark Souls III and Bloodborne, I had been involved on both at different times."

When Miyazaki is creating levels, sometimes the worlds he wants to create don't mesh with the world around it. This was the reasoning behind the enchanting Painted World of Ariamis in *Dark Souls* – one of Miyazaki's favorite zones, and one far removed from the world around it. To access it, players need to have a special doll in their possession and approach a looming painting, getting sucked into the snowy alternate world. Miyazaki says something similar to this world – and other hidden areas like the enigmatic Ash Lake – will probably be available in *Dark Souls III*.

"I created the painted world because I personally like that type of concept and world, but

the second reason was because it doesn't require the worlds to be seamlessly attached," he says. "There are several worlds that I wanted to create, but not all of them make sense in the same world. When this occurs, usage of worlds like the Painted World are convenient because one can travel to a completely different world with some reasoning behind the transition."

Miyazaki uses world transitions for other reasons as well, depending on the situation. For instance, in *Bloodborne*, players need to take a carriage ride to the snowy Cainhurst Castle. Miyazaki could have kept Cainhurst seamlessly attached to the world, but he wanted to emphasize a division of worlds. Whereas Yharnam is home to beasts, Cainhurst Castle is home to vampires.



A "secret" encounter in the Gamescom demo allows players to battle with the Dark Knight

we use to portray this. It's not necessarily the only method, but it's something we use to express the worth of the game."

Miyazaki was warm and personable during our extensive time with him for this cover-story trip, but the director can be notoriously taciturn when it comes to dealing with gaming press and public relations, and his direction is absolute within the office. Miyazaki is the gatekeeper of all things Dark Souls III, with no one else on staff allowed to discuss the project on or off camera, according to publisher Bandai Namco.

Some of the exclusive material that *Game Informer* flew out to Japan to see for the first time was deemed off limits after we stepped into the halls of From Software, even though we confirmed these topics mere days before our Tokyo trek. Among the promised conversation points were specifics regarding the ceremony gameplay mechanic, an in-depth look at magic and the magic system, and playing through a portion of the Tokyo Game Show demo build,

which includes the new magic-wielding class and a wealth of other new content. The extent to which we had access to this material can be summed up with my first question of our lengthy Miyazaki interview. "Can we talk about what ceremonies are and how they work?" I ask. The answer is a simple, "Not at this time," which was a common refrain for every question on the subject matter we were promised to see. Despite repeated questions about where this communication faux pas occurred, whether it was in Bandai Namco's hands or simply Miyazaki's last-minute change of heart, we were unable to confirm the true cause for the severe lack of new information about the game.

According to multiple sources in the industry, who wish to remain anonymous, Miyazaki has a reputation for changing intentions on a dime, forgoing established plans to discuss or show his titles and refusing to bend once that position has been made. After being assured that answers to some of our specific questions regarding these topics would be available shortly when we returned to American soil, the Japanese branch of Bandai Namco went silent on the topic for days and eventually told us nothing else was on the way because Miyazaki and his team were behind on the Tokyo Game Show build, and ceremonies were being redone and may not even be available in the TGS build. No one we talked to from Bandai Namco knew what was going on with the state of the TGS demo or even the features we planned to discuss. It's pretty clear that at From Software, it's Miyazaki's way or the highway.

While Miyazaki's relationship with the gaming press is hardly a concern to the average gamer, working with From Software and Bandai Namco on this cover story can only be described as confusing and punishing — much like a first-time player stepping into the world of Dark Souls. Regardless of the problems we ran into in securing new information, Dark Souls III shows that Miyazaki's approach to difficulty when making video games is in high demand.





NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE SOULS SERIES

Coming down the pipe shortly after Bloodborne, Miyazaki quickly transitioned to Dark Souls III. "I was originally offered to work on Dark Souls III, and I accepted because I have always liked the Souls series and also because I was able to realize once again the great elements of Dark Souls while working on Bloodborne," Miyazaki says. "I thought that if I worked on Dark Souls III, it would be a good time and opportunity to create something great. Working on Bloodborne, I started to miss working on magic, dragons, and fantasy."

While players can expect to see many of the same classic Dark Souls tropes like knights, spells, bonfire checkpoints, and larger-than-life bosses, Miyazaki is making serious changes to some systems in this installment as he returns to the director's chair, having sat out in that capacity for

Dark Souls II. Many of the little tweaks and decisions reflect Miyazaki's own choices from Demon's Souls and Dark Souls, and perhaps a bit of Bloodborne as well. Combat is noticeably faster than previous entries in the series.

One of the completely new concepts in Dark Souls III is the ceremony ritual. Based on our cover artwork and the Gamescom trailer, it's reasonable to infer that what we're seeing is a new mechanic that allows players to create their own bonfires through a special ritual. While From is being secretive with details, this new mechanic is one of the big new features that comes into play in this latest installment.

Battle arts add a new element to physical combat, allowing players to tap into weapon-specific special abilities that have a certain number of charges that can be refueled at bonfires. These range from things like the Guts-inspired



Players will notice blood gushing out of enemies in Dark Souls III. Not as much as Bloodborne, but it's noticeable



How Does Miyazaki Play Souls?

We asked From Software president Hidetaka Miyazaki how he would approach the Dark Souls III demo if he was tasked with taking on the Wall of Lodeleth and its brutal denizens. The result was a highly animated and invigorating sight to witness. But since we can't show you the cool mimed sword strikes and moves that Miyazaki executed, his words will have to do.

"I would select the character with the sword, and approach the game with my shield constantly up and extremely cautiously as I battle each of the characters," he says. "If there were to be an additional character that can use magic, I would probably select a character that can use miracles. I like to enjoy sword play. I shy away from keeping my distance and shooting magic from far out. I like to be up against enemies one-on-one, and so whether this be with miracles, or sword and spear with recovery skills, I'm usually extremely cautious in approaching enemies. Following the cooking analogy, I like to stew. I take each step carefully paying attention to all details. I don't use bold weapons as if in a stir fry or barbeque, but do things slow and steady."

greatsword lunge, rapid-fire bow attacks, or the dual-wielding scimitar whirlwind. Special moves like these provide players with greater tactical options when faced with daunting boss encounters or tough enemies like knights. Don't confuse battle arts for a system where you can just button-mash to win, though. Many of these abilities require timing and come with their own risk/reward assessments that players must gauge in the heat of combat.

Another major feature in Dark Souls III is an overhauled magic system. Players have had access to magic in previous titles, but From Software is doubling down for Dark Souls III. The new system is built on magic points – or a mana bar similar to the health bar – that gives players more management options instead of the limited charges from previous Dark Souls titles. Essentially the goal is to no longer have magic governed by an explicit finite resource from fire to fire, like estus flasks. "By changing the magic management system to an MP scheme, options and freedom of utilization should increase," Miyazaki says. "This way we can better clarify the differences in managing items and magic."

Not to be outdone by battle arts, magic users are getting new options with their spells as well. "We will make sure that they are not just the same type of spells with different attributes (i.e., spear type, lightning type) but actually have specific characteristics that can enhance the players play styles and strategies," Miyazaki says. "Players have more criteria to accurately choose the different types of spells to best fit their tactics and strategies. This is similar to the thinking behind the characterization of each weapon

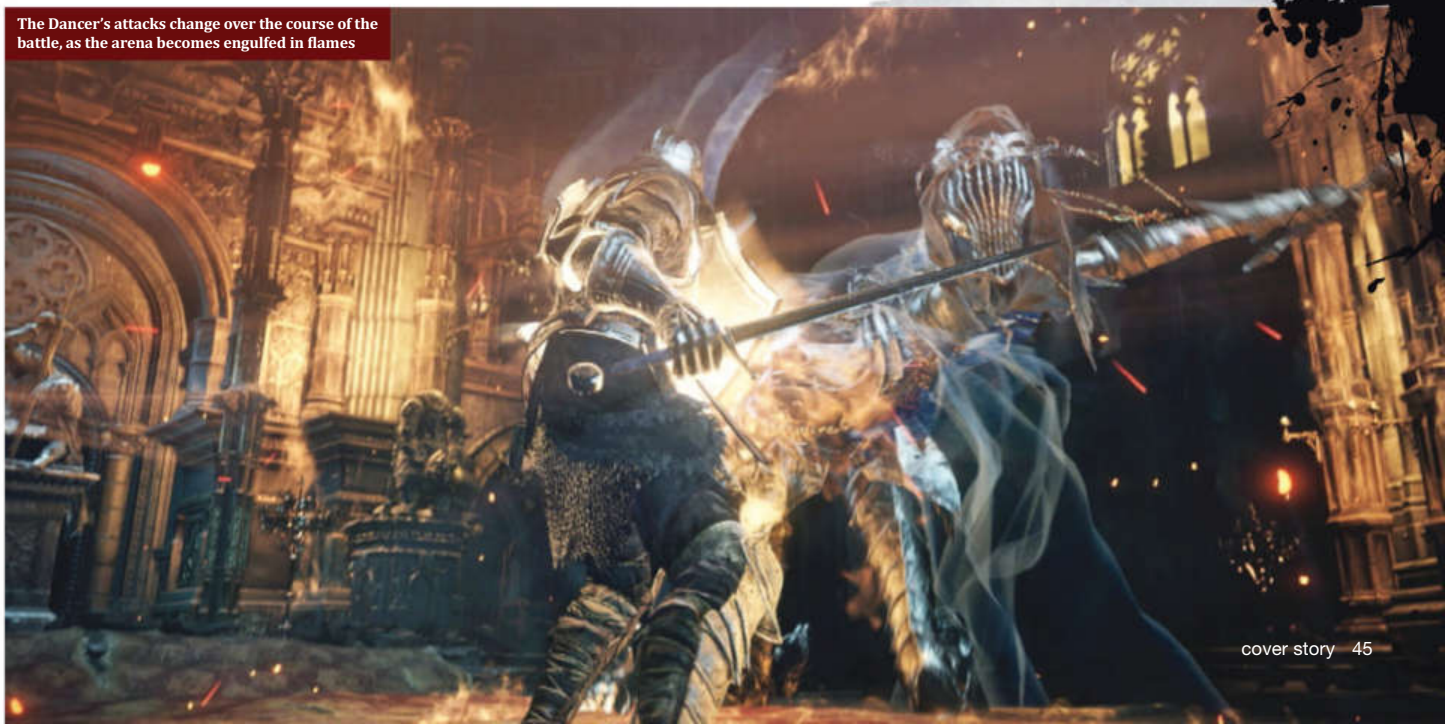
and their specific battle arts."

Optional online play has always been an interesting way to engage with the Souls games, and From Software is shooting for six-person multiplayer functionality in Dark Souls III, but we're not certain if it will make the final version of the game. According to Miyazaki, players should also have an easier time engaging and summoning NPCs in Dark Souls III compared to previous titles. Players do not require a limited item to invade, a system that many PvP fans disliked in Dark Souls II. Don't be surprised if there is an arena area for those looking for an epic fight, but we don't have any details on it other than its likely existence.

"Summoning and invasions will probably not change very much," Miyazaki says. "Summoning signs will be used, and PvP will use the invasion system. Invasions do not involve limited resources. I don't think that people wanting to play PvP should have to work to acquire the limited resources. Further, for matching, we plan to implement the soul level (character level) system, not soul memory."

Covenants that players can align with for various bonuses are coming back for Dark Souls III, but Miyazaki is changing some of the aspects around to make them easier to understand.

The Dancer's attacks change over the course of the battle, as the arena becomes engulfed in flames





"Covenants to this point had separate rules depending on each of the covenants, but this time I am thinking of maintaining a common rule across the covenants regarding invasions and summoning," Miyazaki says. "Within these rules, various characters appear and various events will occur. For example, in previous games, each covenant had different rules. For Dark Souls III we're hoping to maintain the basic rules of invasions and co-op for each of the covenants, but each particular covenant will determine who invades, who cooperates, what events happen, etc."

The demo places the player high atop the Wall of Lodeleth, a castle-style area that's similar thematically to the Undead Berg from the original Dark Souls. Other similarities exist as well, including an encounter with a dragon on a bridge that can lead to fiery disaster for unwary players – though clever ones will quickly tip the situation in their favor, leading mobs of dangerous enemies into the dragon flame for easy souls.

Travelers encounter many of the staple Souls enemies in this area, including lightning-fast skeletal dogs that can

throw the player off balance and make them vulnerable to more devastating attacks, the all familiar hollow with a torch that flails like a madman, and larger lumbering foes wielding axes. Amongst these adversaries are knight enemies that aren't quite as difficult to take on as the black knights from Dark Souls, but they force a player to respect them. Knights have access to a variety of abilities depending on their type and weapon, and I even saw them switching stances a few times during combat. Knights are intelligent and deadly opponents, and can kill a reckless player in mere moments.

The Wall of Lodeleth is clearly infused with philosophies from the first Dark Souls, with locked doors and looping connections opening up new routes. The melee attacks (even with medium to heavy armor equipped) mixed with the new battle arts is faster than anything the series has ever seen, resulting in what feels like a harmonious mix of Dark Souls and Bloodborne. As I explored this area's dark towers (with the assistance of a torch and a pile of firebombs), I eventually stumbled into the lair of one of Dark



The Dancer of the Frigid Valley is an elegant boss encounter – terrifying and beautiful, it exemplifies the sadness of the dying world of Dark Souls III



DIVERGENT SOULS

Some important aspects of the Souls series are returning for Dark Souls III. Others aren't, or are reappearing in a significantly mutated form. Here's the rundown on some of those shifts.

Hidden Walls

The Dark Souls system of discovering hidden walls by attacking them (instead of pressing the interact button) returns. "This is due to my thinking behind this type of feature," says From Software president Hidetaka Miyazaki. "I like to have coincidences happen during battles, or accidental reveals due to swinging weapons around, randomly shooting arrows. I want to implement this sort of surprise discovery in a natural way when playing the game."

Fast Travel

Players have access to fast travel from the beginning of the game with no special quest item required.

Soul Vessel (Respecialization)

While the specific Soul Vessel item may not return, Miyazaki wants to bring back a system for players to be able to toy around with their stat allocations. "I'm not sure if the same sort of item will be implemented, but there will be a method for players to re-assign souls," Miyazaki says. "We want to make sure that features that became beneficial and convenient during the transition from DS1 to DS2 are maintained, unless they were interfering with the game design."

New Game+

New Game + features new enemy configurations/placements and new items, similar to Dark Souls II. Bonfire ascetics (to artificially alter areas to various stages of New Game+) will probably not appear in the game.

Durability

Your weapons still break down in Dark Souls III, but Miyazaki hopes that third time's a charm with this one. "We're still tuning the balance, but I personally think that the weapons in Dark Souls II break a little too easily," he says. "This was implemented intending for the players to try out many types of weapons, but even so, I felt they broke too quickly. However, they didn't break enough in Dark Souls, so I'm hoping to find a good balance for Dark Souls III."

The Dark Souls "Tutorial"

Souls games commonly start off giving the player a broken sword and pitting them against a difficult, seemingly impossible foe right away. Dark Souls III eschews this now-familiar trope in favor of a new approach. Miyazaki discusses this shift with a chuckle, remarking that he doesn't want players seeing an opening like this and commenting, "Again?!"

Dragon Tails

If you're hoping to score a Drake Sword from a dangerous dragon or perhaps a gargoyle's tail, this mechanic won't be making it. "There was a lot of negative feedback regarding cutting off the tail, so we probably won't use it in Dark Souls III," Miyazaki says. "There will be dragon weapons/items in Dark Souls III, but not necessarily from cutting off parts. I like the concept of dragon weapons, however, so they will be in the game."

Trading With Crows

In previous Souls games, savvy players can seek out and trade with mysterious invisible entities at crow's nests by dropping items. The original reason for this was actually due to technical limitations, so maybe in Dark Souls III we'll actually see who or what we're trading our trash with as we dump it off in the nest. Either way, this sort of item trading is back in Dark Souls III.

From Software's Signature Sword

After going missing in Bloodborne, the Moonlight Greatsword that sneaks its way into many of From's titles is returning to Dark Souls III – complete with new abilities.

Souls III's new denizens, the Dark Knight.

While The Dark Knight doesn't have a boss health bar, he serves to display a new debuff that players must have to deal with: frostbite. Much like poison or toxin, a frost bar will fill up when wandering into cold areas or hit by special attacks, and the consequences are dire, draining the stamina bar and hindering stamina recovery, making the player an easy, crippled target.

Like in Bloodborne, Dark Souls III bosses feature a transformative or "heat-up" system that alters their behaviors and abilities over the course of a battle. One of the signature boss encounters that many players have seen at this point is with the Dancer of the Frigid Valley, a dangerous battle with a blazing backdrop that ups the ante halfway through by giving the Dancer an additional sword and new attacks.

FAME, FRANCHISES, AND THE FUTURE

Miyazaki's critical role in one of the most acclaimed series of all time has thrust the From Software president into the spotlight, which he rarely chooses to embrace. Miyazaki says this recognition and acclaim hasn't changed him, pointing out his lack of interest in the pursuit of fame. "I personally don't feel there is a value to me presenting the games I create," he says. "I feel the value in me is with the games I develop, and that is something I would like people to experience. But other than the game I develop, there is very little value in me, and so I tend to avoid presenting myself. I feel that the best means of expressing myself is by having players play my games, and not being very good at carrying out presentations, I try to refrain as much as possible."



The Dark Knight's trail of ice can cause the Frostbite affliction, causing massive problems for a player's stamina bar

SHAPING SOULS ON TABLETOP

From Software President Hidetaka Miyazaki's favorite games are of the tabletop variety, and he would love to see a Dark Souls tabletop game in the future – even if he's been ordered not to make it. "If I were to take part in such project such as card games or tabletop RPGs, this would be the only thing I would work on, and I have been specifically ordered by our previous president to not work on this until I have retired," he says. "I would definitely like to see the Dark Souls IP on different media such as board games. I will probably not be involved in the process, but I personally like having the IP expand to other media and look forward to unique ideas going forward."

Tabletop RPGs and other fantasy fare serve as some of the core inspirational factors for Miyazaki's work on the Souls series, with the upcoming battle arts feature riffing off the "special moves" from some famous characters. "When coming up with the battle arts and spell characteristics I first wanted to come up with the battle style I wanted to implement," he says. "For the greatsword, it's the way Guts (of manga/anime *Berserk*) fights. For rapid-fire with the bow, it's coming from Legolas from *The Lord of the Rings*. The battle style of the mace is planning huge attacks on enemies like a monk. Many of the aspects I'm inspired by for Dark Souls come from fantasy novels and tabletop role-playing games."



Miyazaki realizes that is a natural conflict in speaking to *Game Informer* about his upcoming title while attempting to refrain from presenting it. "I always enjoy talking about games and having this type of discussions with people like yourselves, but when I go home tonight, I may think back to the things I have said and regret how I have presented it or explained the details," he says. "This may be a little contradicting, but it is why I try to stay out of the spotlight."

Whether Miyazaki is interested in recognition or not, the Souls franchise has moved far away from the niche audience it started with. Coming to all major platforms in early 2016, *Dark Souls III* shows promise to continue the cycle by igniting the flame all over again. ♦

For more on From Software's dark fantasy epic, visit gameinformer.com/darksouls3



What's a *Dark Souls* game without dragons? A too-hot-to-handle encounter on a bridge is a staple of the series



Battle arts allow players advanced tactical options and special abilities, such as the scimitar whirlwind

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES



Monolith Soft goes big and aims higher with its open-world RPG

When JRPGs were struggling to evolve last generation, *Xenoblade Chronicles* came along and showed the genre still had a few tricks up its sleeve. It earned plenty of praise as one of the best role-playing games of last generation, currently holding a 92 score on Metacritic. Monolith Soft proved it could create a compelling world and innovate in the genre, thanks to its creative design and MMO-style combat.

Its successor, *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, doesn't just switch it up to an extensive sci-fi setting; it expands the scope of everything, building upon the solid foundation set by its predecessor. I recently spent five hours with the game, and I feel like I've barely scratched the surface. If you thought *Xenoblade Chronicles* was big, you will be surprised just how much *Xenoblade Chronicles X* dwarfs it – and that's not even mentioning the extensive customization or Skills (mechs) that further enhance the experience.

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE



A Strange New Planet

Not much has been revealed about X's plot, except that a huge battle between two alien species above Earth has destroyed our home planet. Humans evacuated and have spent the past two years roaming space in emergency ships. However, the real story doesn't begin until your main character (you can customize your gender and appearance), crash lands on the planet of Mira. Without much memory of who you are, you're greeted by a woman named Elma, who shows you the ropes of life on this mysterious continent called Primordia. A rocky grasslands region, Primordia is the first of five different continents that make up Mira.

Elma explains that when their ship, the *White Whale*, crashed here two months ago,

the surviving humans began slowly building New Los Angeles. A good portion of *Xenoblade Chronicles*' plotline focuses on rebuilding society and finding survivors to revive humanity, but what's most intriguing are the mysteries Mira holds. The planet is teeming with dangers beyond enormous creatures; in fact, as you explore, you run into various alien species. Some will be hostile; others will join your base if you help them out. Can everyone coexist? This already seems more exciting than *Xenoblade Chronicles*' plot. We always question if there's life on other planets and if it would be friendly or not, and I like how X explores this concept.

Also noticeable right out of the gate is that X's dialogue has much more personality than

Xenoblade Chronicles. Your dialogue choices elicit different responses depending on what you pick. These won't alter the storyline, but instead color the conversations you have with other characters. At one point, I try to take credit for keeping the area safe, and Elma quickly calls me on it. Later, we meet our second party member, Lin Lee, a 15-year-old mechanic. She's extremely gifted, but every so often says something that reminds you she's just 15, like when she talks about her Skell fanfiction. The humor isn't overdone and is clever when it's used. Counting Elma and Lin Lee, a total of 16 characters can be recruited for your party. This includes all the DLC characters released in Japan; Nintendo is including them at no cost in the North American release.

Breaking Down The Classes

Xenoblade Chronicles X lets you select from eight different classes, all with their own perks. This helps determine what type of missions you'll focus on the most and see what class fits your playstyle best. Throughout the game, you earn division points for defeating enemies, completing missions, and opening chests. Bonus division points are awarded if you do missions in your specialization. Division points allow you to level up your B.L.A.D.E. rank, which grants you additional rewards and higher level probes.

› PATHFINDERS

Focus: Place data probes all over the planet to expand B.L.A.D.E.'s info network.
Bonus Division Points For: Planting data probes and discovering locales
Special Perk: HP support

› INTERCEPTORS

Focus: Eliminating enemies and helping out locals
Bonus Division Points For: Completing missions and killing foes
Special Perk: Ranged master

› HARRIERS

Focus: Taking down baddies. They also tackle the most vicious creatures to roam the land: tyrants
Bonus Division Points For: Eliminating tyrants and enemies in general
Special Perk: Melee master

› RECLAIMERS

Focus: Locate wreckage from the *White Whale*, the first large ship carrying survivors from Earth that crashed into Mira
Bonus Division Points For: Retrieving pieces from the *White Whale* and placing probes
Special Perk: Drop sensor

› CURATORS

Focus: Study the lands and gather materials from them
Bonus Division Points For: Obtaining collectibles and defeating tyrants
Special Perk: Critical master

› PROSPECTORS

Focus: Mining for ores and resources
Bonus Division Points For: Mining resources and discovering locations
Special Perk: Defense support

› OUTFITTERS

Focus: Developing new weapons
Bonus Division Points for: Expanding corporations and earning corporation points by investing in different companies.
Special Perk: Corporation support

› MEDIATORS

Focus: Solving the problems of New Los Angeles' citizens
Bonus Division Points For: Completing missions and helping recruited B.L.A.D.E. members.
Special Perk: TP support

Becoming a Member of B.L.A.D.E.

The opening moments serve to ease you into the mechanics and all the different things you can do. It's a lot of information to take in, and even after spending five hours with the game, I was still learning the ropes. New Los Angeles, with its four districts, serves as your hub. After a few basic missions, you join up with B.L.A.D.E. (Builders of a Legacy After the Destruction of Earth). This group was created to maintain the burgeoning New Los Angeles and to explore for supplies and threats. Once you join, you get to pick from one of eight different classes [See Breaking Down The Classes sidebar for specifics]. Just because you pick a class doesn't mean you can't do activities associated with others; this just gives you an area to focus on for potential upgrades for your character.

B.L.A.D.E. has its own mission board, where you can retrieve different job requests. From the get-go, the board is overflowing with a variety of missions, on top of people handing you tasks. More than 400 quests exist, including story missions that advance the plot, affinity missions that improve your relationship with characters, and normal side quests such as rescuing characters or retrieving items. The narrative has a total of 12 chapters, but you can't advance unless you meet certain requirements. For instance, you might need to reach a specific affinity level with a character or explore 15 percent of the continent to proceed.

Navigating The Land

A variety of activities are available in Xenoblade X's vast open world, and they fit seamlessly into the overall exploration, such as placing probes (which also opens fast travel to those locations) and helping characters in peril. Who knows? Maybe you'll run into members of a new species and convince them to join up with you. At one point, I recruited a species and I was given access to brand-new weaponry.

One side quest tasked me with obtaining a red orb that was inconveniently placed in front of two level 35 tyrants. I was level five at the time, so there was no way I could afford to draw their attention my way, forcing me to slowly walk by them and figure out a way to

stay out of their sight.

Various chests and places to mine resources are uncovered as you explore. You must tap "A" repeatedly to open these, but some chests remain locked until you level up this ability. Returning from Xenoblade are orbs littered on the field, which contain additional items. The jump button allows you to get up on higher ledges, but if you use it while running you can do a super jump that lets you float through the air. This quickly became my favorite way to explore.

All sorts of creatures inhabit the land, be they aggressive, neutral, or friendly. Paying attention to the color above them is essential; if it's red, you need to keep your awareness up. The joy of the game really stems from exploration; majestic, dinosaur-like creatures are all around. Other continents sport completely different looks. For instance, one is a jungle and contains alligators that leap out from the water to attack you. Another is a fire island that rains fire and allows you to explore inside volcanoes.

Each locale is filled with nooks and crannies, but quests leave a marker for you to track down. Better yet, after a few missions, you unlock the "follow ball." All you need to do is hold "R" and press "X," and a navigational ball leads you to your destination. This comes in handy when there are mountains or other obstacles in your way, showing you a fast path to get around them.





Taking To Battle

Xenoblade Chronicles X's battle system doesn't change significantly from its predecessor. You activate skills on a cooldown meter while your character automatically uses regular attacks, akin to an MMORPG. But the battles are noticeably faster and smoother than before, something Monolith executive director Tetsuya Takahashi said was born out of this game having longer conflicts. "[We] wanted the pace of the combat to be faster, so those don't last too long," he says.

I took delight in finding the right grooves of attacks to create deadly combos. Positioning still matters greatly, and every art has a positioning bonus. For instance, an art bonus can provide a damage increase for a side attack, or a specific art may add a 50-percent damage bonus if the enemy is toppled. You can combine these for devastating combos.

Additionally, I enjoyed being able to alternate between melee and ranged attacks. My character had a deadly sword I could use up close, but if I wanted to play it safer, I could always swap to my gun and snipe from afar. I actually preferred the guns to the sword for this reason – and let's be honest, lasers are just cooler. The A.I. is also much better this time around; my allies rarely died and knew when to fall back and heal.


Arts can be customized to fit your playstyle. For the start of the game, you are a drifter that allows you to obtain a variety of different arts. Once you reach level 10, you have different branches you can break off into: enforcer, striker, and guerrilla. Enforcers support from afar, gaining access to a slew of ranged arts. Guerrillas are like tanks who want to rack up damage; their arts are focused on damage buffs, evasion, and improved accuracy. Strikers go

in guns blazing and are a mix of offensive and defensive skills, providing HP and melee power bonuses. The striker is the recommended class for beginners, while the enforcer is for more experienced players.

Mech Fun

Those expecting to hop right into a mech might be disappointed; you don't get your Skell license until chapter six, halfway through the game. You also won't receive your first Skell until level 20, and you can't pilot it until researching the flight pack after chapter nine. "The main reason we didn't want players to have the Skell from the beginning of the game is that we wanted them to have the opportunity to fully explore the world on foot first," Takahashi says. "The world starts to feel quite a bit different once you have the Skell, especially once you experience different layers of the world vertically."

Nintendo skipped me ahead so I could test one out. Skells definitely make exploration a different beast; you can fly to floating islands and some structures have hidden caves that can only be accessed via flight. Skells also make journeying between continents much easier – I didn't even care about fast travel once I got mine.

Stepping into X is overwhelming for its sheer vastness and scope alone, but that's what makes it so thrilling. The game feels endless, but my desire to keep on playing and discovering new things never left me. My early look has me confident that this game will inspire massive playthroughs just like its predecessor, but X feels like it has even more to offer in terms of variety and size. Plus, who isn't excited to see Takahashi and company get back to their sci-fi roots à la Xenogears and Xenosaga? 

Taking Your Journey Online

In addition to the single-player campaign, Xenoblade Chronicles X has two different online features. You can recruit other player-created character NPCs, who can then be used in your party. You also build affinity with these NPC rentals on the battlefield. However, the more exciting online feature is the ability to join squads. Squads hold 32 players and allow you to participate in squad quests, which let you team up with three other players to take on tougher content, such as the gigantic, super-powerful tyrants.

Before you can unlock squad quests, however, you must first complete squad missions. These special objectives need to be completed in a certain amount of time. All squad members see the list and once a member completes something on it, it gets marked as completed in the other squad members' games. This allows you to divvy up tasks as you see fit. You can also exchange loot with your squad, so if you get gear or weapons that don't suit your playstyle, you can let your friend reap the benefits.



Post-Game Content To Keep You Exploring

Xenoblade Chronicles X also has plenty of late-game content to make your Skell worthwhile. It features numerous post-game monsters, like a level 99 baddie soaring in the sky, and online play makes it possible to take down deadly foes with friends. In addition, hidden dungeons, higher-level mechs, and powerful gear and weapons provide extra incentive to keep exploring. "One figure we're hearing from people [in Japan] is that they've spent two to three times the amount of hours they spent on clearing the main story on end-game content," says Monolith Soft executive director Tetsuya Takahashi.

Rise Of The Tomb Raider

Excitement rises in crypts and caverns

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Crystal Dynamics

» **Release**
November 13
(Xbox One, Xbox 360),
2016 (PlayStation 4, PC)

When Lara Croft wants something, she doesn't hold back, doing everything in her power to achieve it. In my recent hands-on session for Rise of the Tomb Raider, I discovered she's just as resourceful and daring as she's always been, and I couldn't be happier. The Tomb Raider reboot was fantastic, and my hands-on proves that Crystal Dynamics is still at the top of its game, providing thrills at every turn. While previous demos and trailers have shown Lara sneaking around enemies and chatting with a therapist, this demo catered to her actual tomb-raiding skills.

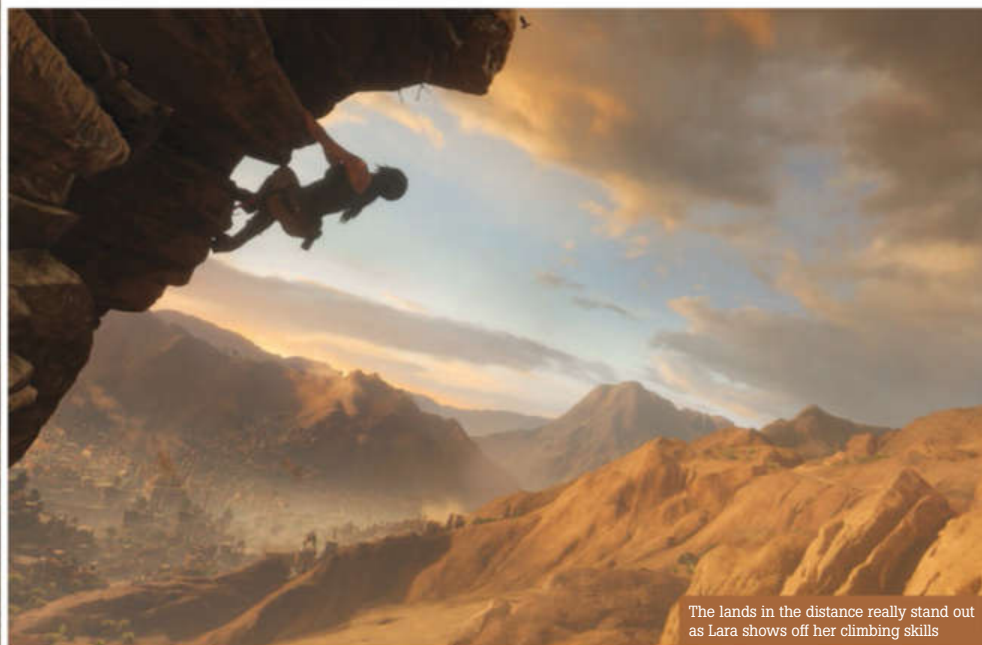
To begin the demo, I hit Lara's first tomb-raiding expedition in Syria. The eerie environs are full of skeletons, insects, and spiderwebs. From the moment you step in, there is ongoing

tension, making you wonder what the next discovery will be. This doesn't just extend to the main narrative, but also to items you find that explain more of what's going on. In Syria, we're tracking down the casket of a prophet who performed healing miracles. Throughout the tomb, we find ancient documents that debate his death. People said they saw him killed, but others indicate they saw the prophet still alive after that.

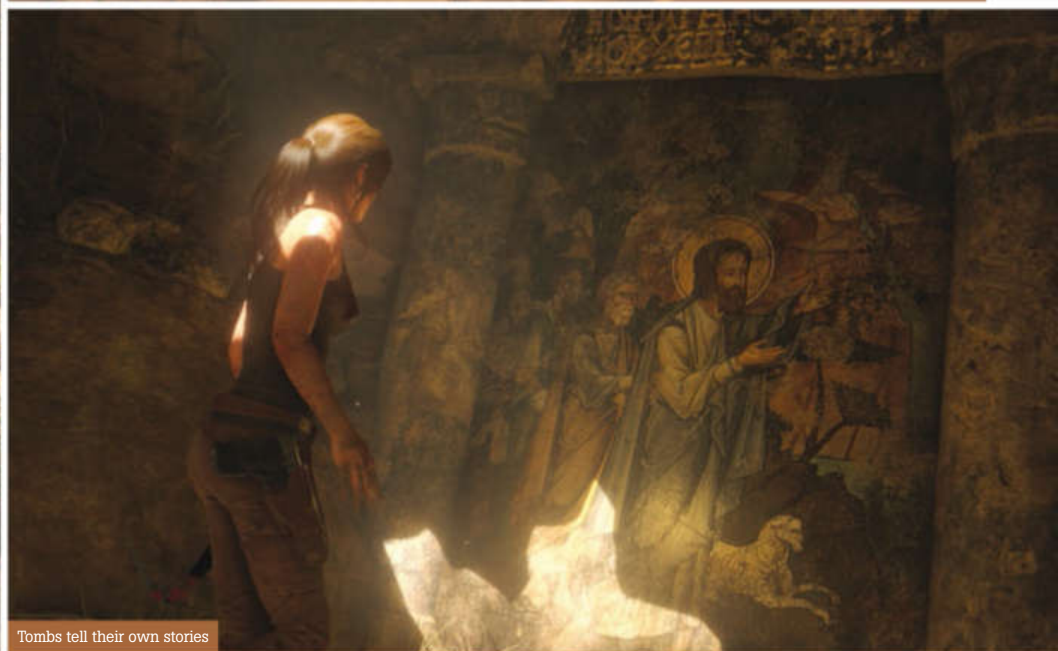
Lara doesn't realize it, but another group called Trinity is set on finding the prophet's tomb before she does. This is the dangerous organization that Lara will be fighting against in Rise of the Tomb Raider, and this mission in particular is what sets her rivalry with them into motion. As Lara explores, she must avoid traps, like

floors that break apart to reveal spikes below them. Expect plenty of climbing, death-defying jumps, and getting around obstacles. Some obstructions require you to shoot down objects, while others have you use your pickaxe to break weak walls. This comes in handy when you want to let water flow to the area below and raise Lara up to out-of-reach locations. Lara is never safe throughout her trek as we've come to expect – foundations often crumble and floors give away. Sometimes she'll even have to swim through deep waters. The controls – which mimic last game's – are still responsive and intuitive, never frustrating me in the slightest.

At one point I'm tasked with shooting down a wooden crate into the water. As it finally flows my way and



The lands in the distance really stand out as Lara shows off her climbing skills



Tombs tell their own stories

I stand on top of it, I have to time the perfect moment to jump off it to latch onto a wall to climb. Little puzzles like this are everywhere, and clicking the right stick to use her survival instinct still reveals all points of interest, like objects involved in environmental puzzles and hidden treasure. I keep going off the beaten path, picking up everything I can for crafting and extra experience. As with the previous entry, the world still holds plenty of rewards for exploring hidden paths. Every time you find a new mural or document, Lara's language-translation skills improve, getting you closer to finding even more places with hidden secrets and treasures. These range from collectibles to new crypts to explore.

When Lara arrives at the prophet's casket, she's surprised to find it empty.

But before she can ponder this, a group of men from Trinity show up. They go toward the prophet's tomb, hoping to get their hands on the relic that should be inside it. They open it, and instead of finding a body, Lara pops out, turning her gun on them. She's outnumbered, but she doesn't care. The leader asks where the relic is, and Lara insists that it was gone when she opened it. This angers the crew; they clearly don't believe her.

Thankfully, Lara being as resourceful as she is, set explosives. She detonates them and the whole tomb begins to crumble, putting me on an intense sequence to flee before it collapses entirely. The adrenaline rush of Tomb Raider that I love kicks in. I don't have much time to react and go on autopilot, jumping frantically as structures

break below me. Every step feels like a close call, but I finally arrive outside of the tomb – safe and sound, for now, anyway. That's where the demo ends.

It looks like Lara will once again have her work cut out for her. Rise of the Tomb Raider doesn't stray too far from its predecessor, but that's not a bad thing. Crystal Dynamics wanted to improve tomb exploration this time around. So far what I played was solid; it really does capture the intensity and fun of being Lara Croft. From near-death jumps to fun environmental puzzles and treasures to find, the experience hooked me just as the initial reboot did. Now I'm just curious how much this story will reveal about Lara. It looks like she has more on her plate than just a thirst for adventure.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

Fallout 4

Love in the Wasteland

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**
Bethesda
Game Studios

» **Release**
November 10

When key members of Fallout 4's development team reveal even they haven't seen everything the game has to offer after playing it for 400-plus hours, there's reason to be excited and worried. Excited that we'll be able to lose ourselves for months on end in a sprawling, post-apocalyptic wasteland that gives us ownership over our characters, relationships, and choices. Worried that the November 10 release date is right around the corner, and no one outside of Bethesda Game Studios has gotten their hands on the game, which is far larger and more ambitious than anything the developer has attempted before.

Bethesda is doing what it can to ensure Fallout 4's launch isn't as problematic as The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim's. As remarkable as Skyrim was in the end, it got off to a shaky start with players experiencing a wide range of bugs such as backward-flying dragons, and PlayStation 3 players putting the game down entirely until its crippling framerate issues were patched.

Fallout 4's game director Todd Howard says Skyrim's popularity and volume of player data within it created problems in troubleshooting bugs. "It probably took us a month or two before we really had a handle on it," he says. "All of the updates we did on Skyrim, and all of the DLC – once we sorted [the bugs out] we had a different process for how we checked the content out. There will always be some problems. I think we've gotten way better there. For us, [the player's] saved game is the number one thing. If the game crashes, that's bad, but it is nowhere near as bad as someone's saved game being hosed. That's the



Dramatic death cams are still a part of the V.A.T.S. experience

scenario that we will do anything and everything to avoid. We made a lot of progress given how Skyrim went, but we did it during Skyrim. This just builds on that."

More reassuring yet, Bethesda's vice president of marketing and PR Pete Hines revealed that Fallout 4 was "essentially done" in an episode of Geoff Keighley's *Bonus Round* that was recorded in late July. "When you talk about what else you are doing, all we're doing is taking what exists and polishing it and fixing bugs," he said. "They are finishing the game. That's all they're doing this summer."

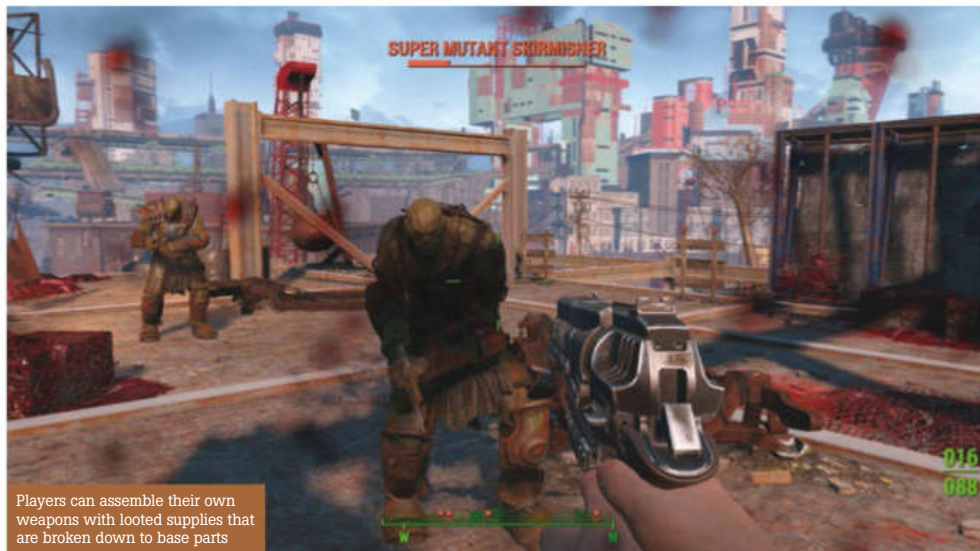
Bethesda has only given us two small tastes of what we will see in Fallout 4 – the unveiling at this year's E3, and a deeper dive into the leveling systems at QuakeCon – but the game's wealth of content already seems daunting.

In Fallout 3 and Fallout: New Vegas, we rummaged through the ruins of the world out of the necessity of survival, looking for ammo, healing items, money, and better armor. The tenant of survival remains, but the scope of looting expands dramatically in Fallout 4, giving us the freedom to scavenge for parts that can be used to create new weapons, armor, and even to build and furnish our own homes and settlements.

We don't yet know how inventory management or being over-encumbered works in Fallout 4, but Howard did give us a look at the newly revamped S.P.E.C.I.A.L. character system. "We really wanted to bring this to the forefront of the game," he says. "This is how you define your character. We have a whole bunch of perks, and those are tied to your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. stats. Every time you level up, you get to pick a perk."

Much like Skyrim's system of looking to the stars to select character traits, Fallout 4's perks are found on a stylish poster filled with animated Vault Boys that act out the perk that is highlighted. A perk like Strength helps the character carry more gear and deal more damage with melee weapons.

"You have this Vault Tech poster with all of your perks, and there is a separate perk for each S.P.E.C.I.A.L. and each value of that S.P.E.C.I.A.L. from 1 to 10," Howard adds. "Each perk, except for a few exceptions, has multiple ranks. We have combined the previous skill system into this as well. If there are 70 base perks and you add all of the ranks, you're getting around 275 of those. We've found that this gets us some really cool different play styles. It's a very cool and fun leveling system in the game."



Players can assemble their own weapons with looted supplies that are broken down to base parts



In addition to determining the build of the character, players also have the option to engage in romantic relationships with companion characters. Howard says there are 12 companions in the game, but only humans can be romanced, regardless of the gender you are playing. “We track how [each companion] feels about you,” Howard says. “We spent a lot of time on this mechanic. They have a lot of personality. You can also play without a companion, and we have special perks if you want to play as kind of a lone wanderer.”

One of the new companions is a female reporter named Piper who resides in Diamond City, a thriving settlement built in the ruins of Fenway Park. In the brief gameplay clip we are shown of Piper, she seems intelligent and quick-witted, as she verbally spars with an irate citizen. She runs her own paper called Public Occurrences.

The last bit of new Fallout 4 information comes from a lengthy gameplay demo set in Lexington, a colorful and detailed city filled with hostile Ghouls and Raiders, both of which are more aggressive in their tactics than we’ve seen in previous Fallout experiences. The Ghouls move quickly, and appear to often attack in swarms, creating a suffocating combat experience. Thankfully, they don’t have much armor and are dropped quickly with carefully placed shots and Dogmeat, the canine companion, coming to the rescue to take down enemies with a jump that knocks them down and a throat bite that finishes them off.

The demo shows off the interior of a Super Duper Mart that has been heavily ransacked, but is still filled with objects and a wealth of detail. A robot roams its messy aisles, repeating the saying

One of the flight options in Fallout 4 is a jetpack



“protect and serve” as it slowly rolls by.

The market gives us our first look at lock picking (through the use of bobby pins), and terminal hacking, which forces the player to decipher a scrambled sequence of letters, numbers, and characters in what appears to be the same way as Fallout 3.

A variety of unique weapons are shown; one fires red lasers, another green acid. The most impressive weapon shown is a fan-favorite from yesteryear: the Fat Man, a heavy firearm that fires mini-nukes. In this instance, the weapon is used to wipe out bandits, with beautiful mushroom clouds and fire rising from their singed corpses. The Fat Man’s final test is against a Behemoth, a towering beast that wields a large pole with a red fire hydrant attached to it. The Behemoth sprints at the character, impressively withstands one Fat Man direct hit, but succumbs to the next, falling to the

ground dramatically as the mushroom cloud rises high into the sky.

Through the run-and-gun chaos, we also saw that V.A.T.S. is no longer a system you can rely on for a quick break from the action. V.A.T.S. doesn’t freeze the game; it only slows it. This means that if an enemy is descending behind cover, specific hit zones may disappear as his body lowers behind the object.

The lengthy demo impressed, showing off a high level of detail in the interior and exterior environments, and gunplay that looks vastly improved from the previous games.

Bethesda has been oddly guarded with Fallout 4 leading up to launch. Is this something we should be concerned about? It sounds like the studio is going the extra mile to make a more polished and stable experience, but we’ll find out soon enough on November 10. » **Andrew Reiner**

Mafia III

Organized crime moves from the Big Apple to the Big Easy

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Hangar 13

» **Release**
2016

The Mafia series has given players a chance to live out their mobbed-up fantasies in worlds that are reminiscent of *The Godfather* movies. Francis Ford Coppola's classic films may have captured the public's imagination, but Italians are far from the only people who have profited from organized crime. The newly announced third entry in 2K Games' series veers into an unconventional direction, moving the action away from Empire City and introducing audiences to a whole new set of criminal players.

"In our early conversations internally, we talked about wanting to reclaim the term 'mafia' to mean more than the Italian mob," says Haden Blackman, studio head and creative director at developer Hangar 13. "We also wanted to continue the trend of moving Mafia forward in time, and that's where we set on the '60s, and then '68 specifically. There are lots of reasons we chose that year specifically. Those were sort of the first two pieces that came together, and from that it was like, 'If we're going to try to reclaim the word

mafia to mean more than the Italian mob, who should our protagonist be? It's going to be in the late '60s, does that inform who our protagonist is?'"

Hangar 13 found its lead in Lincoln Clay, a man whose deep need for family led him from a childhood spent in orphanages to finding an adoptive home of sorts in the black mob. After serving in the military – including a tour in Vietnam – he returns home to Louisiana to a horrifying scene. His loved ones have been murdered in what looks like a double-cross from



Players can choose to intervene in situations like this, where the police are hassling people, or avoid getting involved

the ruling Italian mafia. That gives Clay a new mission: Take down the New Orleans mob, from the bottom-feeding lowlifes to its head, Sal Marcano.

One of the big hooks in *Mafia III* is that Clay won't be embarking on this revenge-fueled journey alone. His military training is a tremendous asset, to be sure, but his innate ability to bring people from a variety of backgrounds together is the linchpin of his success.

Early in the game, Hangar 13 says that Clay will enlist three of his own lieutenants. "Burke runs the Irish gang and feels put upon for various reasons," Blackman says. "Cassandra runs the Haitian gang and also is at odds with the Italian mob for lots of different reasons. And then there's Vito, who feels like he's been sidelined." For all you *Mafia II* veterans out there, yes, we're talking about Vito Scaletta, the protagonist of the last game. Now out of prison, he's been relegated to the sidelines in New Orleans. That doesn't mean he won't be playing a vital role, however.

Each of Clay's allies can be called upon to provide a variety of services and favors. If you find yourself being pursued by the police – an inevitable scenario – you can put in a call at a pay phone to get the law off your heels. As Clay clears mafia hideouts and strongholds, he assigns them to his lieutenants, too. After all, he's a

busy man. The decision holds weight, since he'll earn different exclusive upgrades and abilities depending on who takes control of these buildings. To further complicate matters, tough guys have egos that are easily bruised. Show too much favoritism to one of your three allies, and the others could react poorly – even violently.

I saw one of these hideout-clearing missions in action in a demo, starting from the intel-gathering phase. Clay hears about one of Marcano's lackeys, and decides to take him down. After gaining information about his whereabouts from a reluctant informant – who becomes more forthcoming after a terrifying joyride – Clay heads to his target at a drug den. It's hidden below an active nightclub, which means that strolling in with a shotgun isn't a smart

play. Fortunately, there are a variety of alternate ways inside.

He heads down into the basement, which is a complicated maze of tunnels that includes surprising features like a domed concert space and access to a waterway. Clay tracks down the goon, who's in the middle of a heated discussion with a soon-to-be-dead lackey of his own, and violently makes his presence known. The rest of the demo shows off the cover system as Clay's methodical entrance gives way to a frantic, gunshot-filled escape.

Afterward, Clay assigns the club's management to one of his friends. The decision doesn't seem to upset the balance, but who knows how things will play out in the long term.

» **Jeff Cork**



Mafia III is set in 1968, so prepare yourself for plenty of tapestries, throw rugs, and heat-packing hippies

Quantum Break

We'd like to speed up time to play Remedy's latest



» **Platform**
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Remedy Entertainment

» **Release**
April 5

In some ways, the long wait for Quantum Break is poetic. For a game all about time breaking down, it fits that we've been waiting two years on an ever-extending development schedule to see the project come together. After getting an in-depth look at both the gameplay and the accompanying live-action show, it feels like our patience is paying off.

When Remedy announced Quantum Break at E3 2013, we weren't sure what to make of the studio's idea for a live-action component to the story. Now that the developer has assembled a strong cast of Shawn Ashmore (*X-Men*, *The Following*), Dominic Monaghan (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Lost*), Aiden Gillen (*Game of Thrones*, *The Wire*), and Lance Reddick (*Fringe*, *The Wire*), we're feeling much more confident about how the whole package is coming together.

Ashmore steps into the role of protagonist Jack Joyce, Monaghan is playing his brother Will, Gillen is the face of villain Paul Serene, with Reddick his right-hand man, Mr. Hatch.

Just like *Alan Wake* before it, Quantum Break has an episodic loop. Players will complete a gameplay segment as Jack, and then watch a 22-minute television-style episode from the villains' point of view.

Microsoft showed the world an action segment during its Gamescom press conference, which combined a number of the time-altering abilities. Jack can use his newfound powers to dash, freeze time in a localized area, blast enemies with a wave of force, or move faster than his foes in an effect that makes it seem like time has slowed around him. Jack is thrust into his conflict with Serene and his Monarch troops, but even without

military training he stands a chance thanks to his abilities.

We had a chance to see even more gameplay, including a new platforming segment that takes place in a time stutter. There is beauty in time breaking down around Jack, as the environment becomes unpredictable and catastrophe is frozen moments from being unleashed.

Much like *Uncharted*, Quantum Break intersperses these platforming segments with action-focused shootouts. At the conclusion of each chapter, players must make a choice about the future, which in turn dictates how both gameplay and live-action sequences play out.

The short bits of filmed footage we saw were well-acted, and tie closely to the gameplay. Remedy drove the point home by showing how a gameplay segment and a live-action moment were the same, except from different



Time breaks down within one of Quantum Break's stutters



points of view.

Microsoft and Remedy haven't settled on how the television show will be distributed, which means it could be on disc or available on-demand via Xbox Live. It is included in the purchase of the game, though. Since player choice impacts both pieces of the package, there is more video than players will see in a single play-through.

Quantum Break is finally in the home stretch, and creative director Sam Lake tells us that the game is playable from start to finish right now. The studio is in the bug-fixing and polishing stage. With a firm release date now announced, we just need to wait the nine months until release. If only we could speed up time.

» **Michael Futter**

Head to gameinformer.com to read an interview with creative director Sam Lake and lead actor Shawn Ashmore



Jack needs to soften up these guards before disabling their backpacks

Marvel Heroes 2016

Marvel's superheroes continue to morph



» **Platform**
PC • Mac

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Gazillion Entertainment

» **Developer**
Gazillion Entertainment

» **Release**
Fall

Marvel Heroes has changed significantly over the years, transforming from a rather lackluster launch title to a popular free-to-play superhero action-RPG playground where players blast and slam their way through sackfuls of loot with their favorite Marvel characters. With Marvel Heroes 2015 bringing the game into the spotlight with its myriad changes and improvements, the title is looking ahead to the next giant update, full of new characters, content, and systems.

Marvel Heroes 2016 picks up the original story, which has essentially been abandoned the last two years. The new chapter explores Secret Invasion, where an alien shapeshifting race threatens to take over. The story does not follow the

comics on a strict basis, but fans should recognize some similarities.

New bosses and zones flesh out the story content. Raids are an unusual addition to an action role-playing game, but Marvel Heroes is nonetheless adding a gigantic one with the update – players must face off with Thanos.

A new zone type, the Savage Land, allows players to sort of combine tower defense and dungeon crawling as they set up special towers to square off with waves of dinosaurs and bosses. Since it's drop-in, drop-out, you can pop in for some action anytime you want and leave if you feel like doing something else.

Leaderboards and seasons are also

coming in Marvel Heroes 2016. "We're going to do leaderboards in a variety of ways," says Gazillion CEO David Brevik. "Some leaderboards you have to grind 24/7 to even think about competing; you can't have any kind of life and hit the top. We're going to try to change things up and have some leaderboards be real short sessions, like maybe three or four hours, and you'll be competing during that session only. You can get exclusive items and prizes from these leaderboards and we'll be able to change things up by selecting the activities, characters, and other variables. It will basically be a new cool thing to do every night."

Controller support is coming to Marvel Heroes 2016 as well. "It's an



God Doom is from Marvel's latest epic, *Secret Wars*

often-requested feature and the game plays naturally with it," Brevik says. "It should be a great addition. You'll be able to customize and map the buttons to your liking." Whether or not this portends the game coming to console, Gazillion won't say, but this functionality could lead to the game gracing current-gen consoles.

The 2016 update also brings a visual update to vastly improve many of the models, especially the heroes. One can scarcely recognize the barebones originals next to the updated versions. Other updates include a new and improved inventory/bank stash-management system to help better organize those massive piles of loot, Steam achievements, and the Mac

client leaving beta status behind.

Marvel Heroes 2016 continues the practice of pushing out one, sometimes even two new heroes each month (along with the occasional playable villain). So how does Gazillion balance the new hero entering every month? "Some would question whether we do or not, but we have a lot of tools that help with this process," Brevik says. "Through testing and iteration to tune things to balance fairly well. We get them as close as possible while trying to keep their flavor; you know in the Marvel universe itself, Hulk and Thor are sort of in a different league than Daredevil and Punisher – and that's okay – but we don't want that disparity in the game. We want

everyone to have fun. Each hero plays differently from each other; they all have 25 different skills and we get a new one each month."

Events are a big part of the game now and will continue to be so in Marvel Heroes 2016, from movie tie-ins to standard weekly events, these dynamic events keep things fresh. Things like item boosts or experience bonuses are always going on, but special events for holidays like "X-giving" for Thanksgiving also help bolster the content roster.

With this new arsenal of promising changes, Gazillion is putting Marvel's cast of superheroes in position to keep succeeding. Look for the update to hit this fall. » **Daniel Tack**

Choose The Next Superhero

If you are a big fan of Marvel Heroes 2016 you can vote on the next hero added to the game. Head to GameInformer.com and choose from Spider-Man (Miles Morales), Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan), Gamora, Green Goblin, Wasp, or Angela. While most of these characters will probably make it into the game eventually, you can help decide which one is next.



Scalebound

A full-scale RPG to sink your (dragon) teeth into

» **Platform**
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(2 to 4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft

» **Developer**
Platinum Games

» **Release**
2016

Hideki Kamiya, the man behind games like *Devil May Cry* and *Bayonetta*, has become synonymous with stylish action games. So when he debuted the first gameplay footage for *Scalebound* at this year's Gamescom, many people were surprised to discover it was a slower-paced action/RPG. Kamiya obviously has a flair for going over-the-top, but he's also worked on games like *Ōkami* and *Resident Evil* that slow things down. For *Scalebound*, Kamiya was ready for a change of pace and to venture into new territory with a full-fledged RPG.

Scalebound stars Drew, a man from Earth who suddenly ends up in the strange world of Draconis. If the footage is any indication, Drew is an overconfident guy who wears headphones and shouts cringe-worthy phrases, such as "Use your words" and "Let's rock, baby." He bonds with a dragon named Thuban, and the pair work together to take down baddies as they explore the vast world, trying to figure out its mysteries.

Despite Drew's annoying dialogue,

Scalebound garners plenty of excitement with its action-oriented combat and customization options. Drew and his dragon share a lifesource in battle; the pair have a deep bond and continue to develop it throughout the game for additional perks. The player controls Drew, while the A.I. takes care of Thuban. However, that doesn't mean you don't have any say in Thuban's actions. You can issue simple commands, such as telling him who to target and when to engage or fall back.

Thuban has a devastating fire attack that reaches a wide range, but he can also stomp on or kick enemies that get in his path. Outside of battle he can remove any obstacles that block the way in the environment, like large tree trunks. Drew has various weapons he can equip, such as a sword, spear, and bow, and a gauge on the bottom of the screen shows the weapon's durability. He can swap between these weapons on the fly, so he can use his sword to slash at close-range enemies and take out his

bow to shoot foes that are far away on ledges.

The combat has a good flow and plenty of variety, including Drew's ability to use items such as stun mines to temporarily paralyze enemies, or use a hook shot to pull himself on top of a foe to attack its weak points. He even has the power to transform into a powered-up dragon form to deliver stronger attacks for a period of time.

Downing enemies produces gems, the in-game currency. These gems can be spent on items at shops or used to customize your dragon. The customization options seem extensive and have me most excited; you can customize your dragon with different skins, armor, skills, and abilities. Additional features allow you to fight using your favorite element and control your dragon's evolution and life. Details are scarce right now on these features, but from what I saw, it looks like you have a lot of control over how you build your characters.

Scalebound also features four-player co-op, but Platinum Games isn't ready



This dragon is your buddy. You build your bond up with it through the game



Drew's dragon arm represents that he's already bonded with Thuban



Drew is the only one you control, but you can issue simple commands to Thuban

to discuss it further. Kamiya did confirm in our interview (see page 32) that there's a reason for why all the characters are identical, and that it would make sense with the storyline. Time will tell exactly what co-op entails, but I'm interested in what it adds to the experience, especially how you can keep track of all the madness on-screen. The monsters are massive, and having four dragons and Drews on screen sounds like a recipe for chaos.

Despite some reservations, I'm eager to see more of Scalebound. Kamiya's games always teem with creativity. I'm intrigued to see what he can do with such a large world and how he'll innovate in the RPG genre. Kamiya himself seems excited to take a stab at the genre. "I always wanted to create a game in a fantasy world setting with the main subject matter being dragons," he says. "In order for that to come to life and come to fruition you need a setting like this, a very large world. The genre is a natural element of making this happen. For me, it's a dream-come-true type of project." » **Kimberley Wallace**

NBA 2K16

Building a contender

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Sports
(10-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
2K Sports

» **Developer**
Visual Concepts

» **Release**
September 29

With its diverse array of deep game modes and strong gameplay, NBA 2K15 should have contended with FIFA for the sports game of the year. But constant server stability issues once again prevented eager fans from enjoying both offline and online modes, and this blue chip prospect found itself on the outside looking in. We won't know if NBA 2K16 can address this crippling deficiency until the game tips off on Sept. 29, but Visual Concepts is pushing the boundaries of sports games with forward-looking features.

On the court, NBA 2K16 is introducing several big ideas to enhance the gameplay experience. Visual Concepts is introducing new blending technology and a physics-based collision system to smooth out the player motion as they move in and out of animations and make body contact. Big bodies like LeBron have a better chance of muscling through small defenders. Revamped situational awareness should give A.I. teammates a better understanding of player intent so they can react on the fly, moving between creating an off-ball screen or cutting to the basket in a split second as the play evolves, for example. The low post and passing controls have been rebuilt as well to give the user more fidelity.

One of the more intriguing new concepts being pitched by Visual Concepts in NBA 2K16 is the adaptive coaching



tactics. If you shut down an A.I.-controlled team's pick and roll offense or deny their big men the ball in the paint, the coaches will react accordingly and employ new tactics. This could pay big dividends for realism during the playoffs. Last year the Warriors won the championship by switching to a small-ball lineup. You could see that play out in NBA 2K16 as well.

Realism isn't the only approach that pays dividends in sports games – sometimes empowering players to write their own fiction is equally rewarding. The MyGM and MyLeagues are both benefitting from this approach with the new team-relocation system. Want to move the Thunder or Lakers back to Seattle or Minneapolis, respectively?

Go right ahead. Making the move is as simple as choosing a new location in MyLeague, but if you are playing MyGM you will need the blessing of 16 of the 30 franchise owners.

The relocation process doesn't stop there. Users can then rebrand the team and design the arena and jerseys with user-generated logos or those created by 2K. The depth to the customization is impressive, especially in regards to the arena. You can tweak everything from the type of scorer's table and jumbotron to the color of the basketball rims and sound effects that play when a player misses a free throw. Once you complete the move, the league may undergo realignment to make sensible divisions.





Visual Concepts says big moments have been enhanced to truly bring out the excitement and drama of close games, with improved crowd noise/animation, arena-specific atmosphere, and context-specific gameplay

Relocation is just one of the big decisions you can make during the offseason. The lottery and draft are both receiving facelifts to make them more entertaining to watch, and a new staff-hiring system gives each member of your coaching team his own sense of career goals. If a valued assistant takes off for a promotion elsewhere, you can poach a new up-and-comer from another staff or grab one of the former head coaches that another team just fired. Scouts may have designs on becoming general managers, and some players could even move all the way up the executive ranks after they retire. A summer league and 2K Hoops Summit round out the offseason, giving you a chance to play with your young prospects and potential lottery picks before the regular season gets under way.

Expect stiffer competition from the A.I.-controlled teams when you are trying to build a contender thanks to the new advanced team-building logic driving their decision making. Each team falls into one of four categories: rebuilding, buying, selling, or contending. The GM will make decisions based on future projections of his roster. If a star like LeBron James is heading to free agency in a couple years and the team has a need for that position, it will begin to make moves to get into the bidding, including clearing salary space. Users can access a team intel screen to get a better understanding of where each team is at, which players on their roster are considered untouchable, and which players they may be targeting in free agency.

All of the new ideas being introduced in NBA 2K16 sound promising, but 2K still hasn't talked about its plans to patch up its biggest problem. Should servers be stabilized, this franchise should find itself back in the limelight.

» **Matt Bertz**



TEAM INTEL

CELTICS

RECORD: 5-9

CONF/DIV: 6TH/1ST

CAP SPACE: -\$3.41M

POS	NAME	OVR	AGE
PG	I.Thomas	81	26
SG	A.Bradley	77	25
SF	E.Turner	74	27
PF	J.Sullinger	77	23
C	T.Zeller	76	25
OTH	D.Lee	76	32

TEAM STATUS

REBUILDING

- The Celtics are clearly in rebuild mode and will likely be looking to dump players for picks.
- The Celtics don't have any players on the trading block.
- The Celtics want to acquire LeBron James [SF, 84], Pau Gasol [PF, 85], and Al Horford [C, 83].
- We currently aren't aware of any players on the roster with expiring contracts.
- Expiring contracts: Jared Sullinger [PF, 77],...

Users can access a team-intel screen to get a quick glimpse of a franchise's current status, their untouchable players, their trade block, players on the roster with expiring contracts, and players they are thinking of targeting either via trade or free agency



Visual Concepts says the new physics-based collision model removes the need to rely on multi-actor mocap to resolve body-to-body collisions both on the floor and in the air



Crackdown 3

Stomping out crime in an all-new city

» **Platform**
Xbox One

» **Style**
1-Player Action
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Reagent Games

» **Release**
2016

Crackdown showed a lot of promise when the first game launched in 2007, letting players loose in a massive city filled with gang warfare and superhuman cops. After a lackluster sequel came out a few years later, it seemed the series had stalled out for good. Last year, Microsoft announced that Crackdown was suiting up again, and at Gamescom I saw the Xbox One game in action.

The multiplayer demo dropped me in the city with a handgun, machine gun, rocket launcher, and a single purpose: blow up as much as I can. This display of destruction is impressive thanks to the use of Microsoft's much-vaunted cloud technology. Joined by a few like-minded maniacs, we take down several prominent towers by whittling through their facades and tearing through the iron infrastructure inside. Once weakened enough, they collapse

realistically, taking out nearby buildings and leaving massive piles of wreckage. It felt like more of a tech demo than anything else, but it showed the hardware's capabilities.

Single-player also features destructible environments, but nowhere close to that degree. You are in law enforcement, after all, and it doesn't make much sense to run around leveling the city you're charged with protecting. Agents have the same "skills for kills" leveling system, but agility orbs won't be wandering all over the map like they did in Crackdown 2, according to game director Dave Jones.

One of the more interesting aspects of the game is how Reagent Games is working to inject more personality into the world. Crime lords have been a series fixture, but they haven't lived up to their potential as larger-than-life foils. In Crackdown 3, buildings, signs,

and even your vehicles are covered in what Reagent calls digital fabric. This substance can display in-universe advertising and provide a futuristic sheen over the city – making it seem more vibrant and alive. As players recover territory from the crime lords, the villains can hack into the network, allowing them to project taunting hologram-like messages throughout the city as a way of reacting.

Make a crime lord angry enough by knocking out their source of income or destroying their minions, and they'll retaliate. Reagent isn't talking much about these at this point, but we did see a lieutenant decked out in a mechanical exoskeleton. The superheroic agents had a hard time taking him out, even after dropping shipping crates and other environmental hazards on the machine.

» **Jeff Cork**



The city is in peril, and players need to work to dismantle criminal organizations piece by piece



When buildings take enough damage in Crackdown 3's multiplayer, they'll topple like trees, taking out nearby structures





Assassin's Creed Syndicate

Gaining more freedom in how you assassinate your target

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Quebec

» **Release**
October 23

Assassin's Creed has seen its ups and downs since it became an annualized series, but with Ubisoft Quebec leading the project for the first time, hopefully some new lifeblood can be injected into the franchise. Director Scott Phillips knows it's a concern, and the team is dialing it back this entry and not including extras like co-op or multi-player to focus all efforts on the core single-player experience.

"We started two years ago and spent a lot of time working on our tech and polishing the engine that's there," Phillips says. "There's a lot of drive

in the studio to make sure we deliver our first entry in the Assassin's Creed franchise very, very strong."

Recently, I went hands-on with the game, which is set in London during the Industrial Revolution. The demo focused on Evie Frye, a rare female protagonist in a long line of mostly male leads. Evie's highly skilled at stealth, much more than her twin brother, Jacob. During the game, you play as both with certain missions and story sequences centered on each of them.

The demo showcased a black-box mission, where you choose how you want to achieve your goal. Evie's destination is the famous Tower of London, which she expects might carry the shroud, a piece of Eden, which is a source of great power. Her mission? Assassinate Lucy Throne, a Templar also hunting for the relic. The map shows various entry points and people of interest to help get the job done. You can choose your own path or tap a person of interest. My options include an infiltration opportunity to get a guard's master keys, a stealth approach to locate an allied guard, or a mission to liberate the constable for his assistance. I pursue the allied guard.

As I make my way toward the contact,

I use Evie's unique chameleon ability, which allows her to become invisible when in stealth mode to get around patrolling guards. The game has a full skill tree, so you decide what skills you want to invest in.

Once I reach the allied guard, he lets me know that some patrols are disguised as Templars. He offers to sneak me into The Tower of London, as long as I eliminate the Templar guards who already saw him during their patrol. I use the new rope launcher to make my way toward them. The gadget makes exploration much faster, as you can latch on to a far away building and swing right to it. Once I kill the two enemies, the allied guard pretends Evie's his prisoner and he's turning her in. When we arrive at Throne's location, she assumes Evie is captured and lets her guard down. Evie strikes the moment Throne turns her back, ending her life with a brutal assassination. Mission complete.

Black-box missions are much more comprehensive in Syndicate than they were in Unity. Here I felt like I better understood all the paths and what I was getting myself into. Let's hope the rest of the game continues to improve on its predecessor. » **Kimberley Wallace**



Homefront: The Revolution

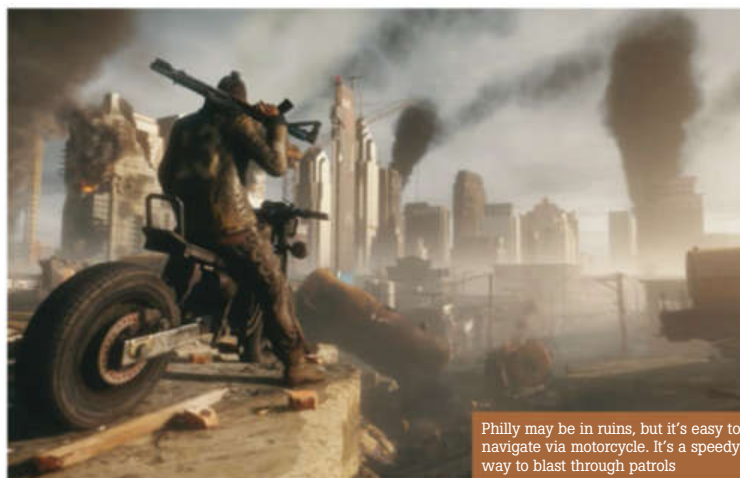
Open-world guerilla warfare in an occupied America

The original Homefront was fun but didn't quite live up to the potential of its premise. New developer Deep Silver Dambuster is well aware of this fact. The team, formerly known as Free Radical, is reexamining nearly every facet of the first game for Homefront: The Revolution.

"There are almost no connections between the two," says senior narrative director C.J. Kershner. "This is a new chapter in the Homefront universe basically operating off the same premise. We like to think of this as a fresh start as opposed to a reboot or anything like that."

You're still an American resistance fighter battling occupying Korean forces in the U.S., though the structure is different. While your character, Ethan Brady, yearns for freedom since the invasion, players have a tremendous amount of it at their disposal. That's one of the things that Kershner thinks was lacking from the original's linear structure.

"It was the one part of the premise that we never fully delivered on," he says. "By taking it open world, you've now suddenly got much broader freedom of movement. By skewing the balance of power and making the enemies so much more powerful than the player and the resistance, we actually bring a sense of vulnerability back into shooters, which is something that they



Philly may be in ruins, but it's easy to navigate via motorcycle. It's a speedy way to blast through patrols

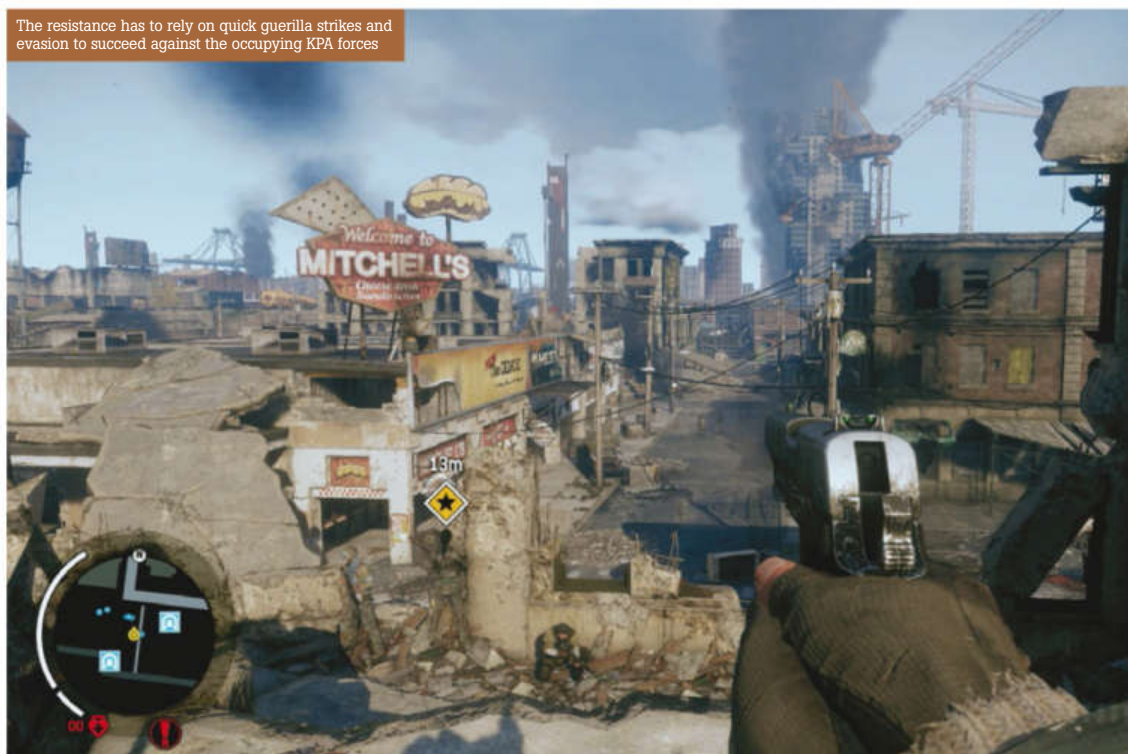
haven't had for a while. Running away in a first-person shooter is almost unheard of, and it's something that happens all the time in our game."

Brady and the resistance have to lay low and rely on their resourcefulness to survive. That manifests itself in a variety of ways. Players can use a wide array of tools in what Dambuster refers to as the guerilla toolkit, including remote-hacking devices that turn the turrets of enemy APCs on their own men, RC cars that deliver explosive payloads, and more. The attachment system turns run-of-the-mill assault rifles into flexible weapons that

can be modified on the fly. Need to take out a sniper? Swap out the scope and you can hit back from afar. Or you could do something more extreme and convert the whole thing into a limpet-mine-firing nightmare.

Homefront: The Revolution emphasizes combat, but it's also attempting to tell a grounded story about life under occupation. "So often, shooters forget about all of the people who are not carrying guns," Kershner says. Players will learn more about life in this grim new reality through a blend of missions and environmental storytelling next year. » **Jeff Cork**

The resistance has to rely on quick guerilla strikes and evasion to succeed against the occupying KPA forces



- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Shooter
- » **Publisher**
Deep Silver
- » **Developer**
Deep Silver
Dambuster
- » **Release**
2016

Behind A Scene

During my conversation with senior narrative director C.J. Kershner, I mentioned what I considered to be Homefront's standout scene, where the protagonist, Connor, stumbled upon a mass grave in a ballpark and had to hide beneath one of the corpses in the pile to avoid detection. As it turns out, he was intimately familiar with the scene. "I was that dead body, and I was staring at the actor face to face, and we were both just trying so hard not to laugh – which is absolutely the wrong response given the emotional needs of that scene."



Master Of Orion

The classic 4X game returns

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Strategy
- » **Publisher**
Wargaming
- » **Developer**
NGD Studios
- » **Release**
2016

The game that put the term 4X (explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate) on the galaxy map is getting a massive makeover as Wargaming and NGD studios reboot the classic strategy title. In Master of Orion, players attempt to conquer the stars via a variety of methods, from military might to deceptive diplomacy, as they engage with a turn-based system that should be familiar to players that missed out on the fun back in 1993.

While NGD is taking the utmost care to keep Master of Orion true to its complex strategy roots, the studio wants to make it more approachable through

user-interface improvements and intuitive gameplay. Instead of having to dig through four esoteric drop-down menus, players can find all the options they need directly at their fingertips.

Technological advances allow the unique races of the galaxies to express their more colorful side through voice acting and dialogue as they interact with the player, and the advisors on your side help walk you through important decisions as you pick new technologies and allocate your workers on each planet.

While you're free to engage with the game at a top level and improve your technology, economy, or military might,

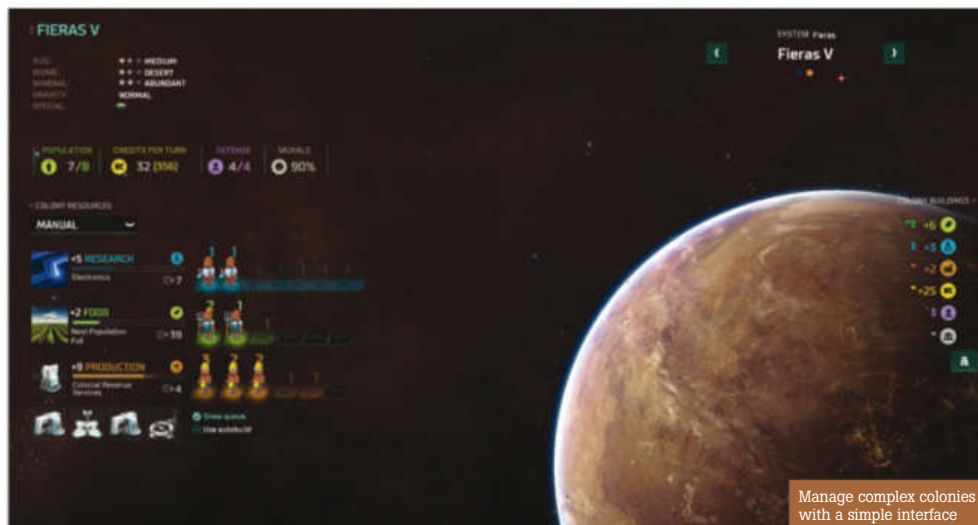
a lot of interesting scenarios pop up turn-to-turn. You may have to manage pollution on your planets based on your production or even face biochemical warfare. If you don't deal with it, your planet may degrade, going from a bountiful ocean planet into a less attractive (and less productive) marsh.

Balancing worker morale is necessary to make sure production is smooth, as taxes and war can take their toll. If morale sinks too low, your population may go on strike, bringing production to a halt. Depending on your strategies, you may want to invest in various perks or entertainment to boost morale and offset potential negatives.

Cloak-and-dagger strategies allow you to sabotage and steal from your opponents and protect your own assets through counter-espionage. In addition to the other factions in the game all trying to interfere with your route to victory, you'll have to deal with wandering space monsters, independent planets, and a whole slathering of other minutia.

A lot is going on in Master of Orion beyond the simple resource gathering, allowing for many different play styles. I'm looking forward to uniting the galaxy through diplomacy as I curry favor from the intergalactic council, but trying out a whole slew of strategies is going to be part of the fun when the reboot hits next year.

» **Daniel Tack**



Manage complex colonies with a simple interface

XCOM 2

Gearing up for guerrilla warfare



In XCOM: Enemy Unknown, the human race was forced to react to an invading alien menace. We needed to quickly build up our resources and communications capabilities, train troops, and develop new technologies to combat enemy forces. We lost that war.

XCOM 2 is, in many ways, a reflection of its predecessor's approach. Humanity is mobile and proactive. It's up to players to take the fight to the aliens and their human collaborators, and you don't have the world's backing or its plentiful resources at your disposal.

Tactically, the humans' best play is guerrilla warfare as opposed to an overt show of force. This means you need to stay mobile and recapture areas of the globe by cultivating resistance cells.

Since players no longer have a fixed base, the Avenger mobile command center now serves as headquarters. The ship can be outfitted like the old Enemy Unknown bunker. Players need to reclaim parts of the alien derelict to bolster research and engineering, train soldiers for specific specialties, and develop ammunition and explosives appropriate for the tasks at hand. Each room can be assigned a non-combat member of the resistance. Effects include speeding up research or manufacturing, or getting a wounded soldier back into battle earlier than expected.

Because you don't have a bank account fed by the world's nations, you have to rely on other resources to accomplish your missions. These include intel and precious time. Intel

is used to make connections with resistance cells and take on missions to liberate segments of the globe. You can also use your resources to purchase technologies from the black market. If you happen to fall behind in R&D, you can catch up via this alternate path, but it'll cost you.

XCOM 2's strategy layer should feel familiar to anyone that played Enemy Unknown, but it's been changed to fit the sequel's theme. The mobile base gives players a chance to react to the changing world around them, support nascent cells, and take the fight to Advent before all is lost.

» **Michael Futter**

You can also read more online about XCOM 2's improved customization at gameinformer.com

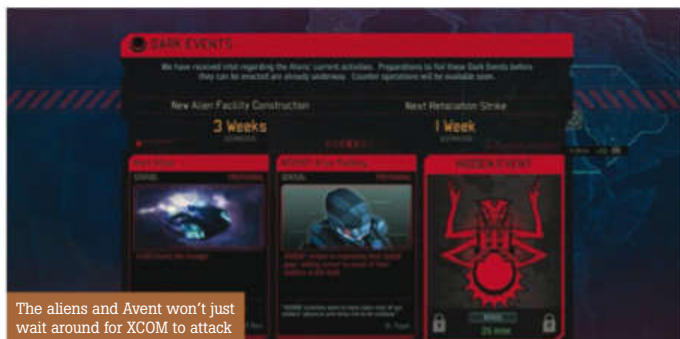
» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy
(2-Player Online)

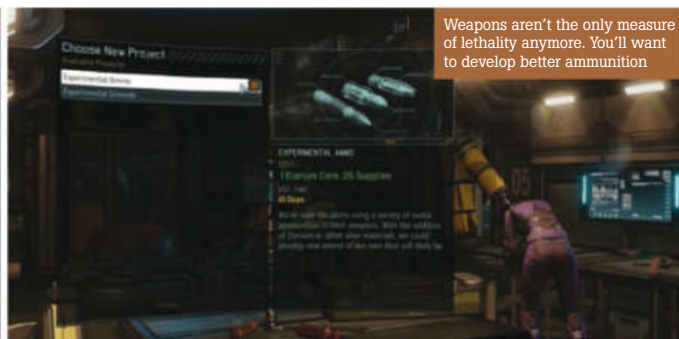
» **Publisher**
2K Games

» **Developer**
Firaxis Games

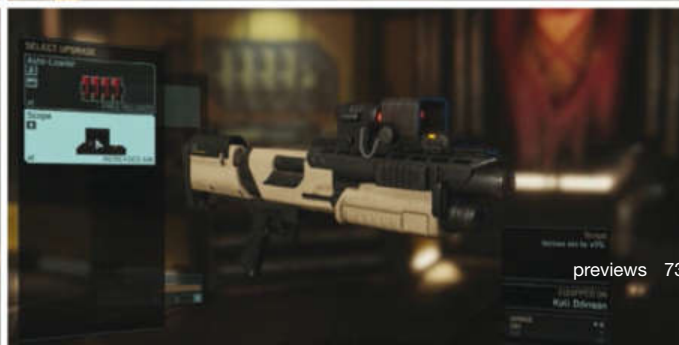
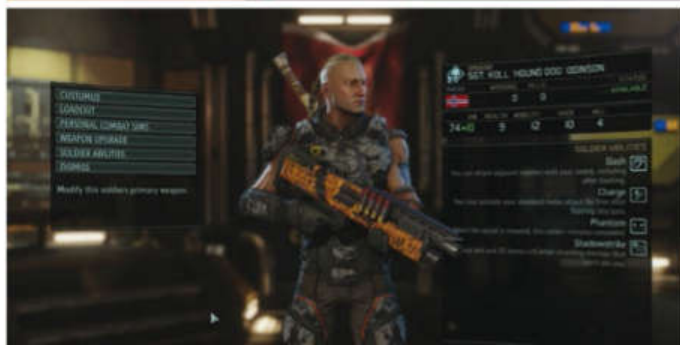
» **Release**
November



The aliens and Advent won't just wait around for XCOM to attack



Weapons aren't the only measure of lethality anymore. You'll want to develop better ammunition





Dragon Quest Heroes: The World Tree's Woe And The Blight Below

Slimes as far as the eye can see

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Omega Force,
Koei Tecmo

» **Release**
October 13

With titles like *Dynasty Warriors*, *Gundam* and *Hyrule Warriors*, Omega Force has demonstrated its battlefield beat-em-up mechanics are capable of adopting the aesthetics of disparate franchises. It was still a surprise, however, to see the announcement of *Dragon Quest Heroes*. The *Dragon Quest* series (sometimes known as *Dragon Warrior* in North America) is no stranger to spin-offs, but it is a turn-based RPG first and foremost, making the idea of its heroes battling swaths of enemies in real time a strange one.

In *Heroes*, you meet and fight alongside familiar *Dragon Quest* characters from past games, but my time with the game was spent exclusively with new characters Aurora and Luceus. Aurora is a headstrong soldier who doesn't like to waste her time waiting to fight. Luceus is constantly trying to plan ahead to even the odds. In some ways, it feels like Luceus represents the game *Dynasty Warriors* wants to be: a tactical action scenario where your decisions have weight. Aurora, on the other hand, represents what *Dynasty Warriors* actually is: a game where the sooner you start fighting, the sooner you make progress. Watching their interaction is charming and lends a level of humor missing among *Dynasty Warriors*' typically dour cast.

Akira Toriyama's art style and character designs are present throughout the game, and they are the sharpest they have ever looked. Toriyama is known for his work on *Dragon Ball Z*, which saw a new game released on current-gen consoles this year with *Xenoverse*. As a result, this isn't the

first time we've seen his work adapted to current-gen graphics, but this is easily the best. The same can be said when comparing *Heroes* to other *Dynasty Warriors* titles; this is the best looking *Dynasty Warriors* game to date.

The biggest separation from the standard *Dynasty Warriors* formula comes in the form of gathering Monster Medals. With these, you can use the monsters you're fighting against as soldiers for your cause. This leads to moments of the tactical battlefield Luceus desires, forcing you to direct a monster army elsewhere while you fight in a different direction.

Dynasty Warriors has always been an enjoyable, but shallow experience. It seems that sentiment won't radically change with *Dragon Quest Heroes*, but I am enjoying seeing the series explore familiar franchises and add new ideas, like making enemies part of your army. Even without much personal affection for the *Dragon Quest* series, my brief time with *Heroes* left me feeling optimistic. » **Kyle Hilliard**



Transformers: Devastation

Blisteringly fun, even without the nostalgia



The Transformers franchise is hugely popular, but your first experience with the giant robots in disguise probably varies depending on when you were born. I didn't catch up on the cheesy goodness of the G1 cartoons until years after the blockbuster Michael Bay films raked in bad reviews and big bucks. Even without the marinating effect of nostalgia, Platinum Games' run at the iconic franchise is an impressive sight to behold with fun, demanding gameplay.

During my recent hands-on time with the game I played through an intro level that feels ripped straight out of the '80s. Megatron has allied with a giant, mechanical menace lurking beneath the Earth's crust, which thrusts its clawed tentacles up to wreak havoc on the evacuated city. Meanwhile, the Decepticons are also trying to clear out the rest of the city by attaching high-powered wind engines to the sides of skyscrapers, which slows Optimus Prime and the rest of the Autobots' pursuit.

We've previously played with the beefy Optimus and nimble Bumblebee in combat, but this time we tried out three other Autobots. The gameplay should be familiar to fans of Platinum's challenging action games like Bayonetta, with high-precision dodges, flurries of combos, and dramatic vehicle-transformation finishers. The engineer, Wheeljack, bashes Decepticons with wrenches and has a useful sticky gun that stops speedy

enemies in their tracks. Sideswipe can fire devastating missile barrages and boost across long distances in his sports-car form. The Dinobot leader, Grimlock, specializes in chomping enemies with careful timing, spewing flames out of his maw, and alternating between his dino and robot form mid-combo.

Don't let Devastation's Saturday-morning-cartoon aesthetic fool you; taking on Megatron's forces isn't as easy as scarfing down a bowl of sugary cereal. The Challenge Rooms specifically test the player's ability to read narrow attack-cue windows and react. One room pits the Autobot of your

choice against all six Constructicons, culminating in a huge showdown with their combined Devastator form. Thankfully, the weapons that you earn and upgrade in the rooms transfer over to the campaign, so you can beef up your plasma guns and Energon swords however you like.

Transformers: Devastation's level of difficulty and visual polish is shaping up to be a treat for both Transformers diehards and Platinum fans alike. High Moon Studios set a high bar with the Cybertron games, but Platinum could deliver an even more intense and frenetic battle between shapeshifting robots. » **Tim Turi**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Platinum Games

» **Release**
October 6



WWE 2K16

Making a face turn



» **Platform**

PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**

1 to 4-Player Fighting
(6-Player Online)

» **Publisher**

2K Sports

» **Developer**

Yuke's,
Visual Concepts

» **Release**

October 27

Fans of this long-running wrestling franchise came away feeling that last year's effort, the first on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, was average at best. With modes trimmed out and odd changes to the control scheme that messed with match pacing, fans turned their attention forward in hopes of improvement.

Based on our brief time with the game, developers Yuke's and Visual Concepts are addressing concerns not only from last year, but those that have lingered for a while. Last year's back-and-forth chain wrestling tie-up system has been tweaked. Players can tie, which opens the door for them to break out of the lockup or deliver a cheap blow.

One of the other major changes is an overhaul to the reversal system. In last year's game, priority could switch back and forth indefinitely. Provided both players nailed the timing, you could go on and on without either side landing a blow.

Reversals are now on a meter that recharges over time. If your bar is empty, you'd best stay away from your

opponent or engage on your own terms when there's an opening. Some moves require a major reversal, which costs two sections of meter. Others give you a single opportunity for a string of attacks, and both of these are noted with different versions of the reversal icon.

The referee, pin, and submission systems are updated for 2K16. Rope breaks are now initiated manually, and you need to make sure the ref can actually see you grab it. You can still kick out of a pin, but the meter is overhauled. The horizontal display is gone in favor of a circular meter. You need to stop the bar in the pie-shaped section of the meter to pull out of the pin. As you get weaker, the wedge shrinks and can move, making it harder to escape. Functionally, it's the same, but works better aesthetically.

The submission minigame takes a page from UFC Undisputed 3. When you have someone in a hold, a circular meter appears with two bars (one for each opponent). The aggressor uses his line to chase the defender's. If they overlap, a meter fills up, ultimately leading to tap-out.

Our demo included one-on-one quick play matches and the first Showcase fight, featuring cover star Stone Cold Steve Austin. The introduction takes us all the way back to 1996, for the King of the Ring finals. Both Austin and opponent Jake the Snake Roberts were injured earlier in the night, with Roberts taking a beating from Vader.

Objectives return this year, and as Austin, players need to bring Roberts into critical range and then perform a Stone Cold Stunner before a pin. The controls and the user interface depicting stamina and momentum are identical to last year, with no major surprises. I transitioned to WWE 2K16 without a problem.

We don't have information yet on the other modes, including creation, universe, and career. They're likely to be in place as you'd expect, but details on changes and improvements will come later. Our first look was brief, with very little to sink our teeth into, but what was there felt better than last year's first outing on new-gen platforms.

» **Michael Futter**





FIFA 16

New signings from the summer transfer window bolster the squad

Gameplay is certainly king, but we sports gamers often place importance on a series' modes because they make up the shell that keeps us coming back repeatedly even after we've played countless matches. A career mode perpetuates the veneer of realism via club management that most sports gamers crave, while a mode like Ultimate Team allows us to live fantasies rooted in the players we know and love. Thus, part of the key to keeping a series vital from year to year is keeping these modes fresh.

To offer a different experience, FIFA 16 introduces a quick-hit FIFA Ultimate Team (FUT) Draft feature. Similar to Madden's Draft Champions, you build your squad by selecting players from multiple rounds of randomly selected players. Pick a superstar captain to anchor your squad, a formation, your players (bench players can be auto generated), and take them into a four-game, single-elimination tournament. These have entry fees of FUT coins or points, but even if you bow out after the first game you'll at least recoup the fee. While building your dream team is still fun in FUT, this is a quick way to get a taste of the mode without playing with a roster filled with below-average players.

The changes to the career mode also look to inject some life – and hopefully youth. In previous years, loaning out your younger players didn't always improve them much. Thus, it was hard

for younger players to grow. This made it difficult to put them in the starting lineup of most clubs, making them angry and rendering youth scouting pointless. This year you can train five players (young or old) each week via 30 drills targeting different attributes. Thankfully this can be automated.

Career mode also comes with the option to participate in pre-season tournaments around the world. Real-life clubs do this for the extra cash and to blood young players as well as let new signings develop chemistry with their new teammates. Someone could get injured, but having to take that chance is another good move toward replicating the never-ending churn of modern soccer.

Other career mode improvements include more job security for managers, the chance to carry forward a percentage of your budget transfer (if you do well enough), the ability to sign free agents outside the transfer

window, general fixes to the transfer network, two-year and six-month loans, and more.

Gameplay has not been neglected either this year. Changes for defense allow your backline to react better as a unit, individuals to track runs and tackle better, and more interceptions through the midfield. In the attacking half, developer EA Canada wants more variety in its crosses (and the movement of players onto them) as well as finishes. Finally, hard precision passes are a risk/reward proposition, and a new feint system lets you dance off the ball when you're holding down the left bumper.

A big part of FIFA's success – apart from gameplay – is its different modes. I often talk to people who only play one facet of a sports title, leaving the others untouched. Thankfully, FIFA 16 is bolstering its main modes as well as its gameplay so that players of all persuasions can look forward to something.

» **Matthew Kato**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports
(22-Player Online)

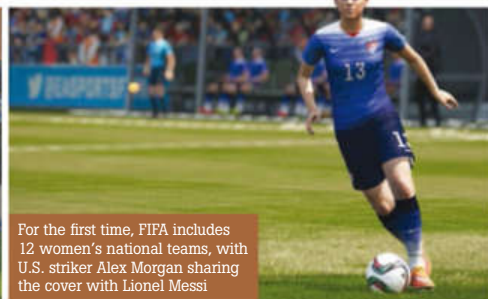
» **Publisher**
EA Sports

» **Developer**
EA Canada

» **Release**
September 22



Different finishes necessitate different kinds of saves



For the first time, FIFA includes 12 women's national teams, with U.S. striker Alex Morgan sharing the cover with Lionel Messi



World Of Warcraft: Legion

The demon hunters return

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
MMORPG
- » **Publisher**
Activision
- » **Developer**
Blizzard
- » **Release**
TBA



After an unprecedented decade-plus run of unbelievable subscription numbers, World of Warcraft has seen some dramatic drops in its player base in recent months. Blizzard no doubt hopes to plug that leak with the announcement of Legion, the sixth full-scale expansion, and the initial reveal provides ample reason to get excited.

For many players, the most compelling addition is the new class. The demon hunter's return as a playable class is a thrill for both Horde and Alliance players, with a look modeled after Illidan's blindfolded incarnation from Warcraft III. The storyline for these new characters focuses on a group of elite demon hunters sent to confront the Burning Legion over a decade ago, but they are now being reawakened to battle the resurgent threat. The opportunity to wield one of those two-bladed warglaives is a potent incentive to check out the class for longtime Warcraft enthusiasts. In addition to high mobility, the demon hunter class also has the ability morph into other forms.

The looming threat of this expansion is the other exciting story component; after confronting the mystical land of Pandaria and the bizarre alternate-history vibe of Draenor, Legion takes us back to a confrontation against the demonic forces of the Burning Legion—as close to a fundamental Big Bad as

this fictional universe has. To stand a chance against this menace, the expansion introduces class-specific customizable Artifact weapons, allowing you to hold on to powerful weapons and continue to develop them over time via ability trees that offer increased spell and ability options. Making changes to your weapon also affects its appearance. Even transforming feral druids can get in on the action, with artifacts that change how they look when in alternate shapes.

In addition to an expected batch of new dungeons and raids, Legion also introduces a new continent called the Broken Isles, a place that was once the beating heart of the Night Elf civilization. Players can look forward to a new honor system, as well as class-specific Order Halls, from which

you can send out NPCs to tackle missions. Players also get to advance up to level 110. New and old players alike can boost one character up to level 100 immediately, and dive into the action with friends.

As a lapsed World of Warcraft player, I can attest that Blizzard has chosen several features for Legion that already have me itching to dive back in. However, I'm withholding judgment until we're closer to launch. Loyal players had a long wait between Mists of Pandaria and Warlords of Draenor. If the wait is anywhere as long for Legion's final release, I worry that the enthusiasm from this admittedly thrilling reveal might fade. With an announced beta for "later this year," I'm hoping my concerns are unwarranted.

» **Matt Miller**



Here are just some of the awesome armaments you can acquire and improve in World Of Warcraft: Legion

Star Wars: The Old Republic — Knights Of The Fallen Empire

BioWare returns to its storytelling roots



The MMO game-development space is a challenging one. Lots of competition and a finite potential audience mean that creators need to constantly think in new ways to engage players. The Old Republic is exploring a novel solution, and it should be fascinating to see if the structure can capture attention. BioWare is preparing to launch a story-driven, single-player-focused expansion exclusively for its paid subscribers. While the studio isn't explicitly saying so, this expansion seems positioned like a Knights of the Old Republic sequel.

Existing players can take their level 60 characters and continue into this new storyline, but anyone can create a brand new hero or heroine. "At character creation, you can choose to start at level 60," says creative director Jesse Sky. "You'll customize your character like you normally would, select your class, and click play. The story will start immediately, and the first chapter will get you accustomed to the gameplay. You'll be provided a set of powerful, iconic gear to start your adventure, so you won't have to worry about it."

The story focuses on the mysterious Emperor Valkorion, hinted at extensively throughout the original Old Republic game. After abandoning the Sith, Valkorion builds the new

Eternal Empire as a third major faction in the galaxy. You play the Outlander, a veteran of the Great Galactic War that unfolded in early parts of the Old Republic story. "This is really an evolution of the Old Republic setting," Sky says. "Revan's story was closely intertwined with the Emperor's, but for much of the timeline in Star Wars: The Old Republic, the Emperor remained a figure cloaked in mystery. With Knights of the Fallen Empire, he's stepping into the spotlight."

This dedicated, standalone plotline places a bigger focus on companion interactions, putting it in line with other successful BioWare titles like Mass Effect and Dragon Age. With new party members in tow, players head out to fresh corners of the Star Wars galaxy. "Knights of the Fallen Empire introduces a new part of the galaxy that's mostly unexplored," Sky says. "After escaping from carbonite, we explore the planet Zakuul, the capital of the Eternal Empire. In the early parts of the story, we spend a lot of time lost or running from agents of the Eternal Empire. This leads us to a secret haven in the clouds on the planet Asylum, and to the dark world of Odessen, where we form the beginnings of an alliance against this new threat."

In addition to an unconventional story structure for an MMO, BioWare is

also exploring a different approach to content rollout. The initial nine chapters of Knights of the Fallen Empire are set to release at the end of October, with subsequent installments rolling out at regular intervals into 2016, culminating in a season conclusion at the end of the 16th chapter.

All of The Old Republic's existing multiplayer-targeted content remains on offer for all subscribers, but this latest expansion looks like a genuine experiment. Are players willing to pay in for solo-focused storytelling in an otherwise multiplayer-focused game? With the palpable excitement surrounding Star Wars right now, BioWare has chosen an opportune moment to give it a try. » **Matt Miller**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
BioWare

» **Release**
October 27



BioWare has put a big focus on cinematic presentation this time around

Guitar Hero Live

An extended play session challenges our preconception

» **Platform**

PlayStation 4
Xbox One • Wii U
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
iOS • Android

» **Style**

1 to 3-Player Music
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**

Activision

» **Developer**

Freestyle Games

» **Release**

October 20

I'm the first to admit to skepticism when I learned of Activision's plan to revive the Guitar Hero franchise. Full-motion video? Streaming songs? A new guitar-controller layout? None of that breeds confidence for me. This month I finally got my hands on the new axe to play several hours of songs, and came away with a much more positive perspective on Guitar Hero Live, even if there are still some features I'm not sure about.

The guitar-controller is a success, not because it offers a better experience than the Rock Band form, but rather a different approach to emulating real play. Instead of moving up and down the guitar neck, the two rows of three buttons keep your hand in a single position, but demand lateral movement across the neck, replicating the feel of playing chords on different strings. As an experienced music-game player, I adjusted to the new paradigm faster than I expected, and enjoyed the new challenge. For beginners, lower difficulties keep the focus on a single row of buttons, so I don't foresee slow adoption of the controls as a problem.

The game splits its content into two separate presentation styles. The "Live" mode contains all the full-motion video content, where 10 fictitious bands play performances with you as the lead guitarist. Each song



has two full video reenactments. The first represents a cheering crowd and affirming bandmates. Miss too many notes, and a spotlight flashes in your eyes as you're treated to a pissed-off audience and incredulous fellow musicians. After playing a few songs, my initial skepticism gave way to wry amusement. The fervor (or disdain) is so melodramatic and overdone it is genuinely fun, whether you're doing well or falling on your face.

The TV mode offers multiple streaming channels of music, all running on their own schedule with background music videos or actual song performances as the visual backdrop. I'm not a fan of having to hop in on the middle of a song I didn't select in

order to make progress. If you enjoy a song in TV mode, and you can spend in-game song tokens to play it once on-demand. Fall in love, and you can pay real money to add it to your permanent catalog. I'm withholding judgment on this system until I see how generous the final game is with song tokens, as well as how many included songs come in the Live play style.

The success of the previous music-game craze was dependent on the addictive sense of immersion in quality music. I'm pleased that both Guitar Hero Live and Rock Band 4 offer distinct fantasies in their upcoming releases. As to which has the potential to hit the top of the charts, it's too early to say. » **Matt Miller**

Hero Power

You can now adjust which ability you gain after acquiring hero power (previously called star power). In-game currency is used to purchase these additional abilities, and as always, they're triggered by a tilt of the guitar or a tap of a dedicated button near your strumming hand. Changing your selection might have a profound effect on your score.

• **Clear Highway:**

A stretch of upcoming notes are instantly removed, but still count as hits

• **Double Multiplier:**

This classic power doubles your multiplier

• **Dial Down:**

Reduces note frequency for a stretch of the song

• **Dial Up:**

Increases note frequency for a stretch of the song

• **Invincibility:**

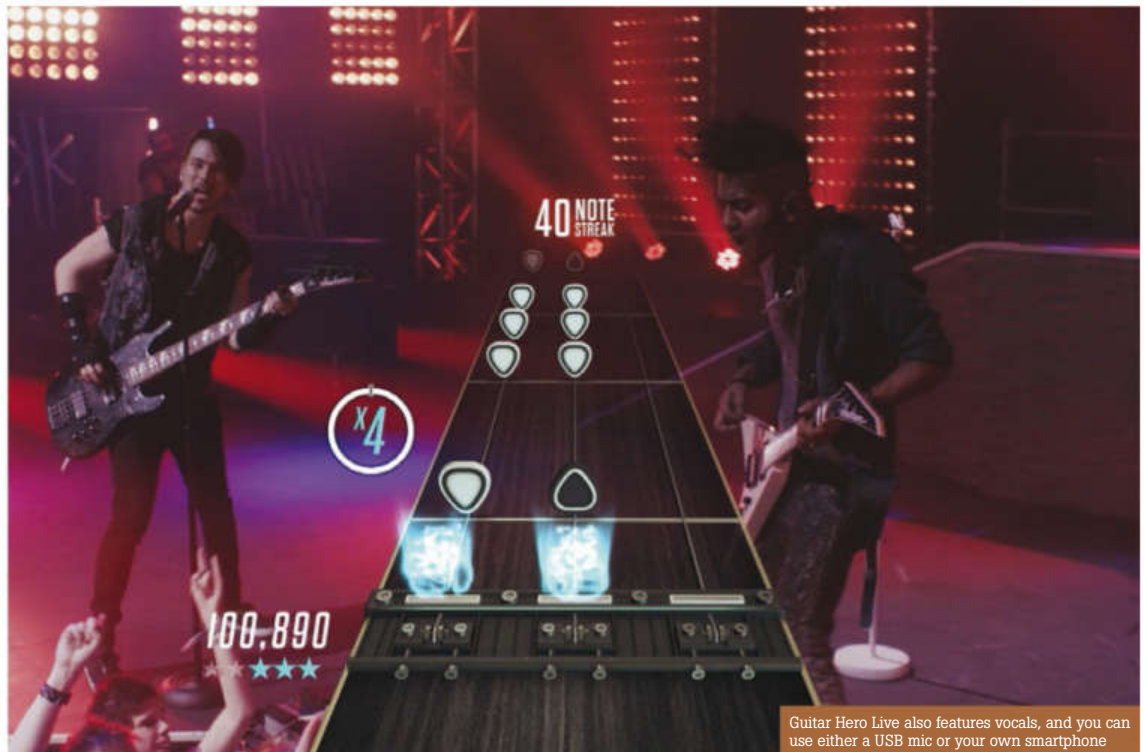
Temporarily hits all notes, and doesn't register missed notes

• **Score Chaser:**

The max-score multiplier is doubled

• **Safety Net:**

Freezes your multiplier and score streak at its current value





Trackmania Turbo

The daredevil racing series is back on track

In an era where developers crow over the 3D modeling of their puddles and the accurate stitching details on steering wheels, Trackmania is competing in a whole different circuit. Nadeo's arcade racer has always been about doing crazy stunts while sneering at gravity, and that's not changing in its latest incarnation, Trackmania Turbo.

Trackmania is an alluring option for players yearning for classic arcade-style racing action. Catching air is inevitable, as is the risk that you're going to fly completely off of the track. Fortunately, drivers can reset their car back onto the course in an instant

with the press of a button.

The two-player Double Driver mode is a fun twist on traditional multiplayer, reminiscent of Katamari Damacy's weird approach to co-op. In this mode, two players cooperate to drive a single car. Each person's controller provides half the required input, so the team needs to coordinate turns to prevent wiping out or bonking into walls. It's a silly diversion, but it remains to be seen if it has much traction over the long term.

Players can still design their own tracks, but there's also a new tool that generates randomized levels with the

press of a button. It's an easy way to try something new when you aren't feeling up to massaging every loop and banked turn, or for people who don't bother creating in the first place to see what's possible. I tried a few of these tracks, and while they didn't feel quite as polished as their hand-built counterparts, it's nice to have access to fresh pavement at a moment's notice.

I'm excited to see what kinds of devilish creations the community comes up with in Trackmania Turbo, as well as what's bound to be an endless source of highlight videos.

» **Jeff Cork**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Racing
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Nadeo

» **Release**
November 27



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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll



gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

83 Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

Stealth games have changed since the original Metal Gear released in 1987, but the latest installment in Hideo Kojima's legendary series represents a new horizon for the genre. Blending open-world freedom with tactical operations, players guide Big Boss through warzones and complete missions using a wide array of different (and satisfying) strategies. With fewer cutscenes and story sequences, you have more time to get lost in building an army and improving your home base. The future of this series may be in doubt, but if this is truly Hideo Kojima's final Metal Gear, The Phantom Pain is a fantastic parting gift.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Kyle's Super Mario Maker levels.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain

A legend worth waiting for



Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) Publisher Konami
Developer Kojima Productions Release September 1 Rating M

9.25

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • Xbox 360 • PC

» Concept

Bring Metal Gear's signature stealth into an open world focused on individual missions

» Graphics

The visuals look great and run smoothly, with some occasional texture pop-in when your focus changes

» Sound

Kiefer Sutherland does a good job, but speaks so rarely that the change from David Hayter in the lead role feels more like a PR stunt than a new direction for the character

» Playability

Some of the contextual commands can be finicky, but the basic stealth and combat mechanics are rock solid

» Entertainment

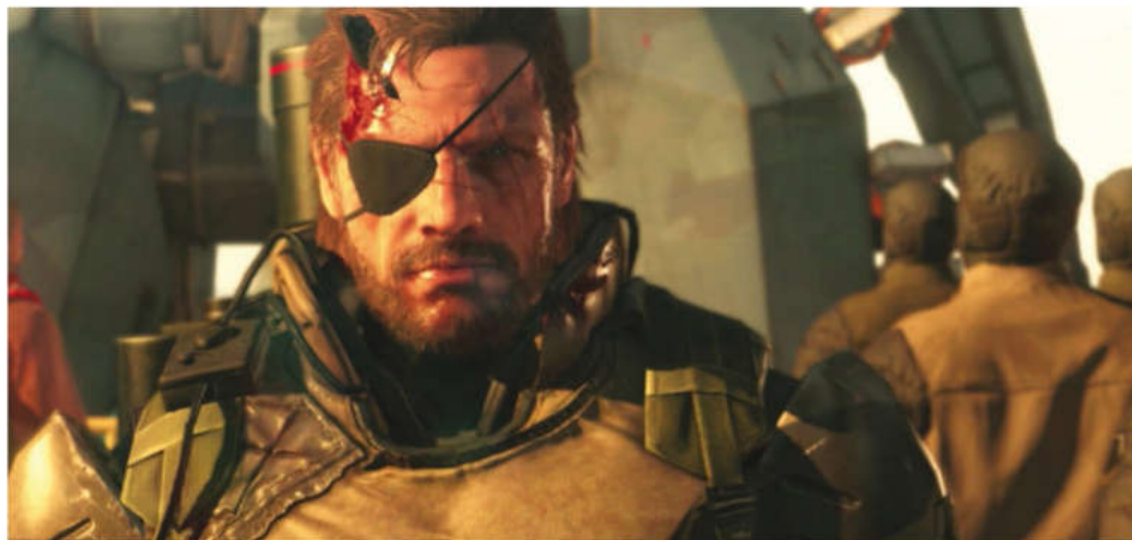
Many missions feel like puzzles, forcing you to use your available resources to find one of many ways to complete your objective. Applying your rewards to building, expanding, and improving your base is an irresistible joy

» Replay Value

High

Branching Out

In addition to your main Mother Base, you can establish additional forward operating bases to augment your progression. However, you need to be online to use them, because they will be attacked by other players. You have the option to defend your base personally. This serves as a multiplayer mode with a cool cat-and-mouse vibe, but it also opens the game up to a level of risk and interaction I'm not usually looking for in Metal Gear. The F.O.B. feature is a neat idea, but you can ignore it and still see the best The Phantom Pain has to offer.



Metal Gear is a member of video gaming's old guard. It has been consistently popular since its inception in the '80s, which is a rare distinction it shares with revered names like Mario and Zelda. Unlike its peers, Metal Gear has been telling a continuous story the whole time – a major strength and a strange weakness all at once. Invested fans adore the series for its narrative just as much as its tactical espionage action, but the sprawling story makes it intimidating for newcomers. Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain is different; it puts the saga of Big Boss and his sons in the background, emphasizing dynamic gameplay and a player-directed approach to progression.

The story is still important, but it isn't the driving force in this installment. As Big Boss, you build an army and work against a villain named Skull Face (introduced in the MGS V prologue, Ground Zeroes). The premise of building Big Boss' legend is interesting, and it evolves to include compelling and unexpected themes that I won't spoil. However, Kojima Productions' decision to offload key story information into optional audio logs means that major developments can occur without necessary context, only letting you learn more about them after the fact.

Without frequent interruptions for exposition, you're free to immerse yourself in the addictive mission-based structure. The sense of freedom is great; you choose the activities and rewards that interest you, like extracting valuable prisoners, stealing resources, sabotaging communications. Getting

into a rhythm is easy and fun, and I had plenty to keep me busy during my 45-hour playthrough.

The transition to an open world is generally smooth, though getting around isn't as easy as it could be. The fast-travel systems are clunky and counterintuitive, which makes it hard to move easily from one objective to another. The inability to quickly get to where you need to be is a weird and unnecessary problem that other open-world titles solved years ago.

Apart from the larger world, The Phantom Pain's solid core mechanics are essentially the same as they were in Ground Zeroes. The biggest difference is the addition of the buddy system, which allows you to take an ally with you on missions. I was initially worried this would dilute the sense of solo infiltration I love about Metal Gear, but I enjoyed finding out how each one contributes in different situations through benefits like intel support and extra firepower.

Unlike the linear design of previous entries, The Phantom Pain rarely assumes you have particular weapons and equipment, so the missions are brilliantly designed with multiple paths to success. It's not as simple as going all-out stealth or aggression; each operation is a playground that encourages you to experiment with the tools you have available. Fulton balloons, rocket-propelled arms, walkers equipped with Gatling guns – the options you have to play with all depend on how you choose to build the legacy of Big Boss.

Everything you do, from main missions to free-roaming hijinks, contributes to

improving your army. It all folds into Mother Base, the secret star of The Phantom Pain. It functions as your skill tree, your arsenal, and a symbol of your power. You invest in your progress with the currency you earn from completing missions, the soldiers you extract, and the resources you gather – the loop goes on and on. The depth of customization and the incentive to keep doing "just one more mission" is amazing, and being able to walk around the base and see your progress first-hand is remarkably rewarding. I was surprised when I realized improving Mother Base – not the main story arc – was the primary force propelling me through The Phantom Pain.

Hideo Kojima's original Metal Gear was a top-down, screen-by-screen stealth title. Compared to the massive and ambitious world of The Phantom Pain, it's hard to believe both games are products of the same creative mind. A series can't survive this long without evolving, and The Phantom Pain is a testament to the importance of taking risks. An open world, a customizable base, a variable mission structure – these are not traditional aspects of Metal Gear, but they are what makes The Phantom Pain such an exceptional game. The gameplay, storytelling, and protagonists in Metal Gear may shift with each new installment, but Kojima's ability to surprise and enthrall gamers remains unchanged. » **Joe Juba**

This review pertains to the PlayStation 4 version. The game is also available on Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC

Madden NFL 16

A giant of the gridiron

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • Xbox 360

» Concept

Passing-game improvements noticeably better the on-the-field experience

» Graphics

Probably the only addition you'll notice is the impressive new on-field presentation touches. Regardless, it's a sweet-looking title

» Sound

The commentators still have some out-of-context lines. Jim Nantz delivers some emotional swells, but this area needs a revamp

» Playability

The new passing game controls take some getting used to but give you more options for making plays

» Entertainment

This year delivers the kind of football moments we've wanted for a long time from the franchise. A clear step forward

» Replay Value

Moderately high



Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (2-Player Online) Publisher EA Sports
Developer EA Tiburon Release August 25 Rating E



Football is the perfect mix of brain and brawn. Split-second smarts are needed to read and execute a play correctly, but superior physical skills determine what ultimately happens. However, in Madden, despite the myriad controls and required stick skills, to me playing offense used to be mainly about calling the right plays and recognizing defenses. This year, gameplay changes to the passing game in particular require both a sharp mind and quick fingers. These and other tweaks combine to bring the game to life like never before.

The optional catch buttons give you more choices as a receiver, and using them correctly often means the difference between a catch and an interception, or a mere completion and a touchdown. Knowing which catch to initiate (aggressive, possession, or run after the catch) is key, but so is the timing of the button press. Doing it early can change the receiver's

route – and not always for the better. Pressing it late won't produce the full effect. Quarterbacks also have distinct high/low pass buttons to go along with the left stick aiming, offering even more control. The results aren't always perfect, but they give each pass play a dynamism not previously seen.

Using the catch controls on defense is naturally harder since you're reacting to the action, but the game does a good job not making the receiver's aggressive catch, for instance, too powerful. The natural variance in gameplay outcomes is exciting. I saw just as many deep balls intercepted or punched out by a defender as I saw jump balls favoring receivers, for example.

Apart from the interactions between receivers and defenders, you'll see plenty of unexpected outcomes. Overthrows and more penalties are welcome mistakes that add to the realism, and Madden 16 finally delivers gang tackles with satisfying physics.

The A.I. is also better this year. I play on All Pro, and although quarterbacks have the same low stats when simming, there is a bigger gap between good and bad/average passers on the field; the good ones can even pick you apart. For the first time ever I actually had to call more than three defensive plays to keep offenses in check.

Madden 16's gameplay is a great step forward for the series, but the progress of the game modes is less definitive. The franchise mode still needs more depth and tools to give you true control over your team. The landing screen

received an unnecessary facelift, which only serves to hide the NFL news that gives you a flavor of the season as well as potential draft tidbits. Speaking of which, during the draft you finally have all your scouting info handy while you make your pick, but I'm lukewarm on the new scouting itself. You get letter grades of a player's top-three attributes, but you can't scout specific attributes.

At least the confidence system is better balanced so there's less chance of players bottoming out, and the drive goals addictively feed their confidence and growth via XP. The drive goals can be contextually smart during a game or season. They're not a roadmap to winning, but rather an alluring secondary goal.

The rest of the modes are largely unchanged. The new Draft Champions mode is cool because it's a relatively quick experience that exposes you to different types of team builds. On the downside, it's hard to become endeared to your team since the players you choose from are random and you might not even understand your team's play style.

Changing Madden's modes isn't the priority this year, but you shouldn't skip this year's game. After years of fitful progress, Madden 16 finally puts its gameplay pieces together and delivers a truly dynamic on-the-field experience.

» **Matthew Kato**



The gang tackles and effects of multiple hits on the ball carrier make a big difference

This review covers the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions. The game is also available on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360

Disney Infinity 3.0

A return to form



Style 1 or 2-Player Action (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Disney Interactive
Developer Avalanche Software **Release** August 31 **Rating** E10+

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U
PS3 • Xbox 360

The might of Iron Man and Captain America weren't enough to save Disney Infinity from an embarrassing showing in the Marvel universe last year. The play sets based on The Avengers, Spider-Man, and Guardians of the Galaxy were case studies in repetition and what not to do with open worlds. Disney Infinity 3.0 arrives just a year after that superhero-sized blunder, and once again expands in size and scope, this time adding the Star Wars universe to a growing roster of characters from the Disney, Pixar, and Marvel properties.

The opening moments of Disney Infinity 3.0's gameplay are filled with excitement and polish, teasing players with brief gameplay snippets stripped from *Inside Out*, *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, and a race between Mickey Mouse and a hilariously out-of-control Donald Duck. This tour of Disney Infinity 3.0's new experiences gives way to a rejuvenated and wonderfully upbeat game that brings back the creative spark that made the series' inaugural release such a wonder.

The Toy Box is once again the main attraction, offering a wide selection of fun new props and mechanics. You use them in worlds designed for adventuring, platforming, racing, combat, and whatever else your imagination allows, such as a Rube Goldberg-like environment designed solely to fling Jar Jar Binks into deep space. The Star Wars selection in the Toy Box is a little light – especially given the wealth of toys in the real world – but includes the hallmark vehicles and monsters from the films

and cartoons. I constructed a fairly detailed Tatooine, complete with Jabba's Palace, the Sarlaac Pit, and a sprawling Mos Eisley spaceport using the handful of available Tatooine-themed buildings and props. My finishing touches were three Star Destroyers hanging ominously in the sky, and a valley filled with as many banthas as I could place without going over the data limit.

The Toy Box is streamlined for creatively challenged people like myself to generate a wealth of content quickly, including new pathing options that keep NPCs moving where you want them to. I don't have the requisite skills to properly analyze the advanced building options, but I did learn a lot of things exploring other people's Toy Boxes using the new theater and matchmaking options.

Many of the best Star Wars Toy Box pieces are not included in the basic version of the game, and are instead unlocked in the Rise Against the Empire play set (available now in the Saga Edition of the game, and sold individually starting September 29). This set is good fun, excelling in lightsaber combat and offering plenty of challenges and enemy types. Fetch quests are used a little too often, and some locations (like the Death Star's interior) are uneventful pit stops in place to wrap up the story as quickly as possible. The play set offers about two to three hours of gameplay, and is nowhere near as fleshed out of a retelling as we've seen in the Lego games.

Twilight of the Republic is the play set you get right out of the box. It's a new

Clone Wars-era tale that parallels Rise's strengths and weaknesses, but it just doesn't have the charm or humor of the classic trilogy content. Ahsoka and Anakin are great additions to Infinity's lineup, and are just a few of the standouts in 3.0's amazing selection of new characters.

The surprising star of Disney Infinity 3.0 is Toy Box Takeover, a separately sold play set that unites the Disney, Star Wars, and Marvel universes in a crazy adventure in which the strangest conflicts can arise – such as Minnie Mouse throwing explosive purses at stormtroopers. This set is nicely paced and loaded with exciting combat challenges. It also puts one of Disney Infinity 3.0's coolest enhancements, sidekicks, into the spotlight. As you play, these computer-controlled helpers fight at your side, and level up as they go. You even get to hunt down a nice selection of loot for them. I'd love to see more sets like this released in the future.

Disney Infinity 3.0 is a return to form for this series and developer Avalanche Software. With the assistance of Sumo Digital and Ninja Theory, the racing and combat are vastly improved. A strong emphasis is placed on variety; hopefully signaling an end to seemingly endless waves of frost giants. With Star Wars, Marvel, Disney, and Pixar already integrated into the Infinity experience, one has to wonder where Avalanche goes from here. No matter what, this series is once again in tip-top shape, and is a place where adults and kids alike should be able to indulge in a wealth of fun.

» **Andrew Reiner**

» Concept

The Star Wars license reenergizes this series, offering enjoyable combat and adventures through the Clone Wars and classic trilogy

» Graphics

The cartoony look works well for the Star Wars property

» Sound

Some of the voice actors do not line up with the characters they are trying to portray. The selection of John Williams music is impressive

» Playability

Combat is vastly improved, and the Star Wars play sets offer plenty of variety

» Entertainment

The Toy Box has always been fun, but it's once again safe to venture back into the play sets

» Replay Value

High



King's Quest Chapter I: A Knight To Remember

It's good to be the king

8

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Sierra Entertainment Developer The Odd Gentlemen Release July 29 Rating E10+

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • Xbox 360 • PC

» Concept

Return to old-school adventure game form with a feather-capped legend in the genre, while shaving off the most annoying bits

» Graphics

The rough, basic character models and environments are saved by a charming art direction and incredible animations

» Sound

Most of the voice actors perform wonderfully, with a few odd exceptions. The music and puzzle sound design is on point

» Playability

Controlling Graham directly feels great. Frequently getting lost while backtracking and the occasional repetitive puzzle design are issues, though

» Entertainment

One of the best examples of an aging formula done right by modern standards. The engaging characters, challenging puzzles, and entertaining story arcs make it easy to recommend

» Replay Value

Moderately high

In recent years, a wellspring of modern adventure games have bubbled up attempting to recapture the magic of yesteryear's point-and-click titles. Modernizing a genre built upon abstract puzzle logic, trial and error, and frequent backtracking is a tall order, but The Odd Gentlemen has found a solid balance in its return to the classic Sierra fantasy series. Save for a couple nuisances, this first chapter is a heartfelt and entertaining return for King Graham.

Part of King's Quest's charm lies in the narrative framework of an elderly King Graham recounting the stories of his youth to his granddaughter, Gwendolyn. Her effervescent attitude meshes well with the tired-yet-playful Graham (voiced by *Back to the Future*'s Christopher Lloyd), giving off a fun, unmistakable *The Princess Bride* vibe. Speaking of *The Princess Bride*, much of the voice acting is spot-on, like the diminutive yet cunning knight-in-training Manny, voiced by the aforementioned film's Wallace Shawn ("inconceivable!"). Lloyd's performance as old Graham mostly works, though the 76-year-old actor occasionally sounds like he's either phoning it in or too tired. Regardless, I found Graham's storytelling with Gwendolyn sweet and refreshing.

This first chapter features Graham's bumbling attempts to fulfill his lifelong goal of becoming a knight. Players directly control Graham using an analog stick, which feels perfectly natural. During some brief early sections,

King's Quest appears to be disappointingly linear, with Graham crawling through a straightforward dragon's lair, throwing switches to reveal obvious paths through the monster's sprawling cave network.

Thankfully, the world opens up in a delightfully nostalgic way, embracing the design tenets of the genre's roots. A large portion of Davenport is open to explore, like the town square's shops, a dubiously advertised floating island, and spooky woods crawling with wolves. Players are left to ponder solutions for various conundrums. How could dipping all my objects into purple dye help me? Should I pilfer a big shield, wooden tabletop, or a huge circular loaf of bread to use as a wagon wheel? King's Quest nails that delightful adventure-game sweet spot for me, where a sudden eureka moment triggers a domino effect of puzzle solutions.

Like the Sierra games of old, Graham can venture into certain death. I watched the prospective knight get crushed by a dragon and turned into squirrel food. Thankfully, Gwendolyn calls out her obviously alive grandfather on the mistelling, allowing players to select a safer path. This clever mechanic, along with generous auto-saving, prevents players from becoming too frustrated or falling into the infamous fail states of the old games.

Being free from severe punishment takes the edge off in a nice way, but King's Quest occasionally frustrates. The open design of Davenport is the

biggest asset and most frequent hang up. Without any type of map, you can easily lose track of where the winding paths lead, even if you've traveled them several times. Adventure-game purists might appreciate it, but even as someone who grew up playing many LucasArts and King's Quest games I found it tedious. Another snag lies in the unskippable cutscenes and dialogue, which become even more annoying when you're trying to investigate an object and accidentally activate a scene you've seen too many times.

Visually, King's Quest is comparable to other modern episodic adventure games. The heavily stylized character design reminds me of Telltale's suite of games. However, The Odd Gentlemen's wonderful animation brings these characters to life. Little touches like young Graham's flowing scarf and flailing arms as he flees add a lot of personality. I noticed a couple woodland critters scampering along with jarringly minimal animations, but these flaws are infrequent.

So far, King's Quest is remarkable in its ability to call back to the classic design of '90s point-and-click adventures without succumbing to as many pitfalls. The combination of wacky character interactions, goofy logic puzzles, and heartfelt story beats has me eager to see what's in store in Chapter II. The team at The Odd Gentlemen has created one of the most endearing, true-to-form adventure games I've played in recent years.

» **Tim Turi**



Volume

Sneaking past the competition



Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Mike Bithell Games **Developer** Mike Bithell Games **Release** August 18 **Rating** T

8.75

PS4 • PC

» Concept

A straightforward stealth experience that challenges you to sneak past guards without fighting them

» Graphics

The no-frills presentation feels appropriate for a virtual-reality simulation

» Sound

An outstanding soundtrack perfectly complements the action, and the voice acting is top-notch

» Playability

Volume is an accessible throwback, with easy-to-learn controls and a fun difficulty curve

» Entertainment

A satisfying and exciting experience from start to finish

» Replay Value

Moderately high



While many stealth games today incorporate combat, the genre of yesteryear offered players no recourse if they were spotted. Volume recaptures that tense feeling of scouting a situation, timing your approach, and relying purely on stealth to complete your objective in a way that reminds us why this purer incarnation of the genre has such a passionate cult following.

Each level requires you to collect all gems on the map to unlock the exit. This simple task is made more complex by the strategic placements of guards on the pathways. Walk into the sightline of a guard, and he is on his way to your location. Fail to break away, and the guard will take you out. Each time I accidentally alerted a guard, my heart raced as I scrambled to outsmart the A.I. and vanish behind a wall.

The action takes place in a sparse simulation-style environment, but the diversity of enemies and varying scenario designs ensure players stay on their toes. While the early stages rely on basic pawns with narrow sightlines, Volume gradually introduces quick-firing turrets, dogs that alert the guards, archers with long sightlines, rogues with 360-degree views, and sword-wielding knights. Each new guard type brings with it new strategies, as knights have a broad field of vision and fast closing speed, while turrets take you out quickly after they spot you, leaving little room for error.

Mike Bithell Games strikes a strong balance with its scenario designs, as the campaign missions provide challenge

without too much frustration. Each time a guard spotted me, I knew exactly what I did wrong and how to avoid it on my next attempt. In one scenario, a group of guards patrolled an area that seemed impassible. After several failures, I realized that I needed to let myself get spotted, and then quickly hide – a maneuver that disrupted the patrol and left holes in the sightlines for me to pass through. While this situation was challenging, the satisfaction of completing it overrode any creeping feeling of frustration. Plus, a lenient checkpoint system minimizes the consequences of failure.

Though you can whistle to lure guards, you don't have any viable combat options, leaving stealth as the only option. To assist you, various gadgets are scattered throughout the levels. Most are centered on supplementing the stealth abilities already at your disposal, but some have unique applications. Noisemakers like the bugle draw guards to specific locations, while disguise gadgets like masquerade let you hide in plain sight. The gadget I loved using the most was the blackjack, which you throw at enemies to stun them.

While I always had fun using the provided gadgets, the levels that entertained me the most provided multiple gadgets and let me tailor my approach based on my loadout. Unfortunately, these scenarios weren't as common as I would have liked, as placement of the gadgets is usually linear in the story. This is consistent with the rest of the core game, as the campaign leads

players to a definite end-point in terms of gameplay and narrative.

The story pits you against Guy Gisborne, a menacing head of a corporation who has amassed too much power for his own good and is holding down the less fortunate members of society. Andy Serkis delivers a brilliant performance as Gisborne, lending to the credibility of the threat. On several occasions, I was so involved with the story that I was in a hurry to get through the level to see what would happen next. Without spoiling anything, one sequence in particular delivers a major twist that had me questioning all I had been told by the characters to that point and challenged my notion of player agency.

While the dialogue is well-written and the overall arc is compelling, the conversation boxes take up a large portion of the screen, disrupting gameplay. With no way to turn them off, I often had to wait until the dialogue would finish before approaching the scenario unobstructed.

As I finished the final level, a strange combination of feelings washed over me – a sense of accomplishment that I had overcome all of the challenges Mike Bithell Games had laid before me, but also a sense of disappointment that the main story was over. Volume's levels are designed with the same care that players must use when playing, and I enjoyed the experience from start to finish. With true stealth games a rare breed today, Volume stands as a declaration that the formula can still work.

» Brian Shea

Level Creation Tools

In addition to the story mode, Volume includes the ability to create and share scenarios. From intricate maps involving gadgets, guards, and varying level elements, to a stage that emulates a level of Pac-Man, I was able to create nearly every scenario I could map out in my head using the intuitive controls. The game requires you be able to beat the level before uploading, so some level of quality control exists at the base level in addition to a community rating system and a "Staff Picks" tab.

Until Dawn

A new dawn for interactive storytelling

9



Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer Supermassive Games **Release** August 25 **Rating** M

PS4

» **Concept**

Create an interactive teen-horror adventure where even your smallest choices can snowball into story-altering (and sometimes fatal) consequences

» **Graphics**

The environments and character models impress, though some facial expressions and animations can be awkward

» **Sound**

The superb dynamic orchestral score and voice acting sell the experience and ratchet up the tension

» **Playability**

The Heavy Rain-style interactions are simple yet effective, serving up more engaging action sequences than other adventure games

» **Entertainment**

Supermassive weaves an intriguing and exciting mystery with all the right teen-horror trappings

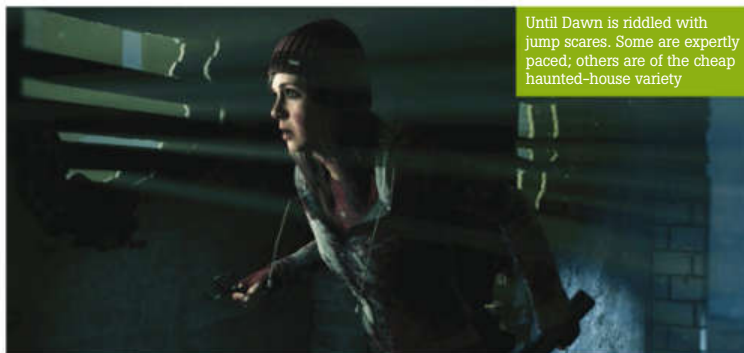
» **Replay Value**

Moderately high

Announced in 2012 as a Move-based PS3 game, *Until Dawn* has undergone a number of delays and design changes during its prolonged development. Normally, such production woes are a bad omen for the fate of a game, but *Until Dawn* doesn't just limp to release like a bloodied survivor; it emerges as an excellently penned teen-horror tale that sets a new standard for the adventure genre.

Like Telltale's myriad series, *Until Dawn* is more story than game. You control a rotating cast of eight endangered teens trying to survive an ill-fated night at a secluded mountain lodge. No puzzles or inventory management are in this adventure – gameplay is composed entirely of exploring eerie locales, timing your way through action sequences, and making an endless series of choices that shape the story. However, thanks to top-notch production values, Supermassive has polished the formula to a triple-A sheen. Outstanding visuals, commendable performances from a cast of professional actors, and a mood-setting dynamic score all bring the characters and environments to life.

But Supermassive's improvements aren't just superficial. *Until Dawn* redefines the importance of player choice in story-driven adventure games. Gone are the closed-loop decisions showing you the immediate repercussions of your choice before funneling you back onto the main path. Instead, your decisions continue to reverberate, impacting later events in complex and unforeseen ways; alienate a friend during a conversation, for instance, and they may not be there to save you hours down the road.



Until Dawn is riddled with jump scares. Some are expertly paced; others are of the cheap haunted-house variety

Numerous feedback techniques highlight the importance of your decisions (including a Butterfly Effect menu that tracks various choices and their consequences), but none are more effective than the brutal death of a character. It's not just smoke and mirrors; while certain characters prove more resilient than others, every member of the main cast is capable of living or dying based on how you play, and you can't go back and fix mistakes – the story continually auto-saves, relentlessly pushing towards its climatic finale without the chance for checkpoints or retries. Who lives to see it depends entirely on you.

Supermassive also excels at crafting a compelling story. *Until Dawn* lovingly serves up a multitude of successful horror-film locales and motifs, while still adding a few fun and novel twists to its three-pronged mystery of who is tormenting our stranded gang and the surrounding area of Blackwood Pines. The cast of dumb teens is also rooted in horror clichés (expect groan-worthy sexual innuendos and catty arguments), but the characters evolve during the

game based on how you play them and offer up chances for redemption (or revenge). Certain character traits are more baked-in than others (Mike will always be a bit of a jerk no matter how noble you play him) and a few dialogue exchanges feel disjointed, but overall the story flows remarkably well.

Until Dawn's mysteries lead you through three-fourths of the adventure – the home stretch is all about trying to keep your remaining characters alive. Thankfully, Supermassive implements smart quick-time events to create nerve-racking action sequences. I normally loathe QTEs, but Supermassive eschews pointless button mashing. Instead, timed presses, precision aiming, and on-the-spot decision-making all keep you engaged, while “Don't Move” prompts task you with holding the controller as still as possible to hide from stalking predators. Like the branching choices, these sequences work because your fear of death is genuine; watching a character that you've played as for hours die because you flubbed an escape sequence is brutal.

The beginning of *Until Dawn* boasts that the decisions you make during the game will craft a unique and personal story. By the time the credits rolled, I was a believer. Sure, every player follows the same narrative skeleton, and a few of the more “expendable” characters aren't instrumental to the ending (I'd also kill for a way to fast-forward scenes on subsequent play-throughs). However, the script kept me entertained and feeling like my decisions mattered throughout my 10-hour playthrough. Thanks to some good twists, a few fake-outs, and limitless jump scares, *Until Dawn* would make a solid horror film. As a piece of interactive fiction, however, it's a remarkable experience that horror fans shouldn't miss. » **Jeff Marchiafava**



Meaningful collectibles help you solve *Until Dawn*'s underlying mystery – and compel you to make the same risky decisions dumb teens do in horror films



Galak-Z: The Dimensional

Sparks of brilliance amidst chaos

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** 17-Bit **Developer** 17-Bit **Release** August 4 **Rating** E10+

8

PS4

My hands are cramped claws. For the past several hours, I've been sneaking through asteroid tunnels and the guts of derelict dreadnaughts, shooting down imperial patrols in dogfights so intense that I've unwittingly gripped my controller tight enough to turn my fingertips white. Galak-Z can be a painful experience at times, but the white-hot action is worth the discomfort.

With Galak-Z, developer 17-Bit has created a charming homage to classic Japanese animated shows like *Robotech*. Every element of the game – from its plucky characters to its opening credits – is a tribute to the developer's love of '80s pop culture. There are even moments during combat that look like they were pulled straight off an old VHS tape.

The action looks simple, but the visuals hide Galak-Z's greater depth. Fusing Asteroids-like shooter gameplay with roguelike elements, Galak-Z sends you on a journey to upgrade your ship while completing a series of randomly generated missions. You get used to the fundamentals of Galak-Z's floaty zero-g combat fairly quickly, but mastering more complex maneuvers – like juking past enemy fire to circle their ships and lay down your own spread of missiles – can take hours. In addition to tearing through space in an agile space jet, you transform it into a giant light-saber-wielding mech that does incredible close-quarters damage. Both modes offer something fresh to the experience, and I spent equal amounts of time trading paint with enemies in

close-quarters duals as I did in long-range sniping exchanges.

After earning my space legs, I really began to appreciate the depth of Galak-Z's combat. I loved boosting up behind enemies, cutting my engines so that they couldn't hear my approach, and then sending my entire arsenal up their tailpipes. And I never tired of using my mech to grapple an enemy and deliver a series of heavy sword strikes against their hulls before sending them careening into another foe or some other deadly environmental hazard.

The environment is more than just a static backdrop. Given the situation, it can be your deadliest enemy or your greatest weapon. Alien spores clog up your ship's engines, and bubbles of lava can be as fatal as a bomb. Empty space stations are full of giant propane canisters that, when hit with a stray bullet, turn into deadly missiles that zigzag all over. Thankfully, these hazards can also be used against your enemies, and they can turn the tide of battle when you need it most. I felt like a maverick every time I lured a group of unsuspecting foes into a minefield of environmental traps.

The minute-to-minute gameplay is a blast, but the larger structure suffers due to its random nature. Galak-Z is split into four seasons (with a free downloadable fifth season on the way), and each season contains five randomly generated missions. As you complete these missions, you slowly acquire new power-ups and ship upgrades that help you overcome the final boss of each season. The

power-ups are completely random, so if you get a bad run and collect a lot of weak upgrades, you are quickly outclassed as the season progresses. This is particularly frustrating since you can't avoid certain fights, and without the proper equipment, one misstep or twitch of the wrong finger can lead to game over in the later levels.

This lack of structure is further exacerbated by the fact that there isn't a wide variety of mission types, power-ups, or environments. In true roguelike fashion, you have to start over at the beginning of a season each time you die (without your power-ups), which means you see the same random elements get recycled over and over again. The only carry-over between seasons are the blueprints you collect for ship upgrades, which unlock new items in the shop. It's like eating a different item off Taco Bell's menu every day; you quickly notice that all the same elements are still here, they've just been rearranged. Even the seasons don't feel much different from each other, so by the time you reach Season 4, a larger sense of monotony begins to set in.

In spite of these frustrations, Galak-Z has the heart of a truly compelling shooter. I wish 17-Bit had taken its elements and laid them out in a game with a more natural progression, or added a greater level of variety to Galak-Z's extensive randomness. However, even when the game feels unfair, I couldn't resist returning to these pinpoint-accurate flight controls and tense dogfights. » **Ben Reeves**

» Concept

A shooter/roguelike mash-up that is brutally challenging and completely engrossing thanks to tight controls and rich combat

» Graphics

Cartoon smoke effects and animated character portraits wonderfully emulate Japanese cartoons from the '80s

» Sound

The electronic, synth-heavy soundtrack is the perfect thing to listen to while blasting space pirates

» Playability

Ship controls are fairly complicated, but mastering them is fun. They allow you to perform a wide array of insane evasive maneuvers

» Entertainment

Galak-Z is the perfect game to play in short bursts. Its random nature means the balancing feels off, but the tight combat will keep you coming back

» Replay Value

Moderately high

Gears Of War: Ultimate Edition

Restored beauty

8

Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (8-Player Online) **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** The Coalition **Release** August 25 **Rating** M

Xbox One • PC

» Concept

Return to the original bloody adventure in a visually overhauled take on the sci-fi cover-based shooter

» Graphics

A beautiful modernization that does more than just retouch existing assets, and instead presents a game that doesn't look out of place on new-gen platforms

» Sound

An excellent score is accompanied by strong voice acting (albeit poorly written dialog), now in 7.1 Surround

» Playability

Smart and useable controller options, but expect to take some time getting used to the snap-to cover mechanics

» Entertainment

A fun and visually impressive trip down memory lane, even if some of the shooting mechanics feel dated

» Replay Value

Moderate

Upon its initial release in 2006, few games could match the pure visual grandeur of Gears of War, and the cover-based shooting mechanics were similarly novel. Cut to 2015, and the remake may not have the graphical chops to compete with the very best in the business, but The Coalition's loving recraft is certainly pretty enough to feel at home on Xbox One. A head-to-toe visual and audio overhaul is as comprehensive as anyone could hope for. Gameplay sees a more minor adjustment, but franchise fans on console should also be attracted to the presence of PC and DLC content that never before made its way to Xbox.

The campaign adventures of a ragtag squad of soldiers remains entertaining and excellently paced, particularly with the addition of the previously PC-exclusive sequences near the end of the game, which include a throwdown against one of the massive Brumak monstrosities. Each act of the narrative offers some fun variations and tonal shifts. Intense, non-stop fights give way to slower moments, like the navigation from light to light through streets where darkness leads to instant death. Moments of horror at an old mining facility transition to a tense and claustrophobic mine-cart shooting sequence. The constant change-up

keeps the action fresh and exciting.

The drama and devastation of the Gears universe has always felt odd when juxtaposed with the bro-dude attitudes of its lead characters, and that disparity was never so true as in this first installment. Cries of "s'up bitches!" and "hell yeah" accompany the action, and your patience for the soldiers' banter will determine a lot about how much you can enjoy the story. For my part, a few conversations are so incongruous that they made me laugh along with the repartee, while simultaneously reminding me that game storytelling has come a long way in the last decade.

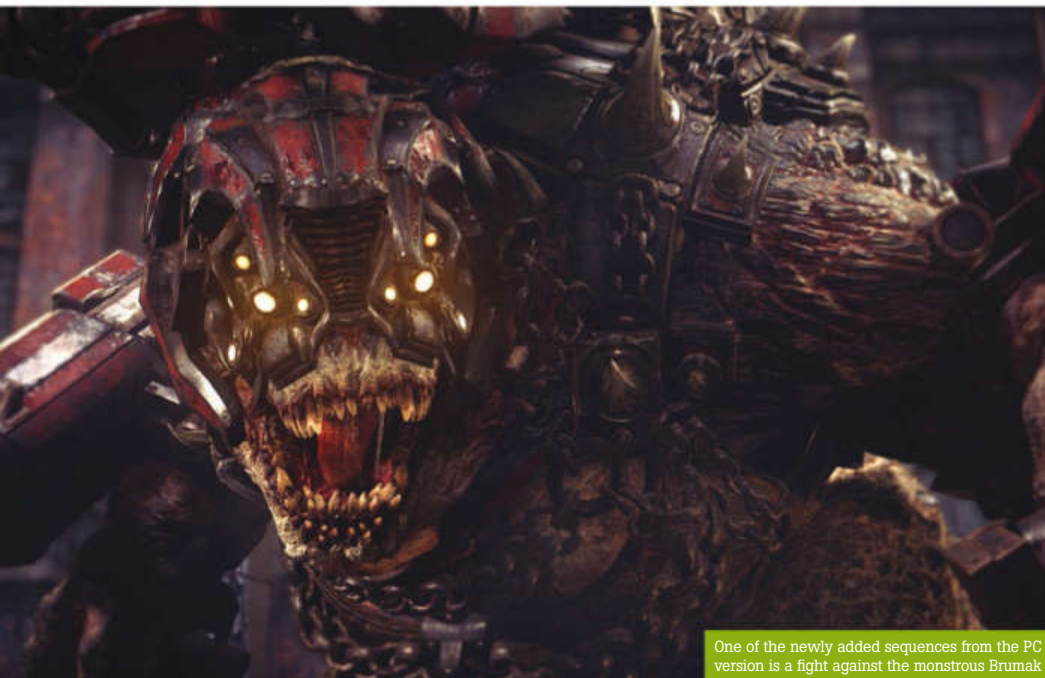
A stellar musical score accompanies your battles, now remastered into Dolby 7.1 Surround. Meanwhile, every inch of textured characters, environments, and cinematics has seen a visual overhaul, as well as a resolution update into 1080p. The result further sells the original's heady art design, which explores a cultured and architecturally sophisticated society brought to ruin through decades of war and violence. Excellent lighting, weapon, and explosion effects accentuate the wartorn tone of the world, and transform Sera into a believable sci-fi setting.

The cover-based shooting is solid, offering tense and bloody exchanges punctuated by gory chainsaw kills and clever encircling maneuvers.

The active-reload system remains the best way anyone in gaming has figured out to make refilling your gun an engaging diversion. Level layout and enemy placement is strong, but both ally and enemy A.I. is abysmal, often making the worst of all possible choices when navigating the battlefield. The ally dilemma is resolved at least in part by playing the game in its best incarnation – as a two-player cooperative enterprise. Both online and split-screen options play smoothly, and combat seems optimized for this style of play, especially with the new option for different difficulty settings during split-screen play. Other little changes, like ally revives while in cover, and weapon toggles during the roadie run, are most welcome.

Multiplayer is chock full of maps and offers lots of great mode options, but your enjoyment will be tempered by how much you liked the original. The constant high-speed rolling and snap-to cover movements of enemy players is likely to feel like an exploit to newcomers, even while veterans recognize it as valid strategy; any way you cut it, the sudden shifts in speed and direction by your targets feels outdated by more recent PvP games. Shotguns dominate the field, suggesting either that further weapon balancing should have been attempted, or perhaps simply that the Gears multiplayer community is set in its ways. Game modes offer a more strategic vibe than many online shooters, with well-designed maps that offer plenty of flanking opportunities, and level layouts that encourage cooperation and tactical control of the environment. With 19 maps that include all the previous DLC and PC exclusives, and 17 unlockable character skins from Gears of War 3, no one can fault the multiplayer for lack of replay and discovery potential.

The Coalition has done this remake right, with attention to detail and an eye toward fan desires. Gameplay feels dated in both campaign and versus, but in many ways that's a testament to the excellence of the original and that it's held up as well as it has. New and old players alike should feel no hesitation about seeing this as the definitive way to play the opening story of the Gears epic. The new edition doesn't remake the cog, but it certainly makes it shiny again. » **Matt Miller**



One of the newly added sequences from the PC version is a fight against the monstrous Brumak

This review pertains to the Xbox One version. The game is also available on PC

Super Mario Maker

Build the Mushroom Kingdom of your dreams



Style 1-Player Action Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release September 11 Rating E

9

Wii U

» Concept

Give players the tools to create their own classic Mario levels and easily play and appreciate the work of others

» Graphics

Classic Mario has never looked better. Even the 8-bit mode looks incredibly sharp in high definition

» Sound

Familiar Mario themes permeate the entire experience, but many new tracks and remixes stand out admirably among the classics

» Playability

The platforming is flawless, and the GamePad's creation tools are intuitive and easy to use

» Entertainment

A literally endless supply of Mario levels is at your fingertips, as long as you don't mind if they aren't up to Nintendo's standard of quality. Getting creative with the tools is fun, and so is seeing what others have devised

» Replay Value

High



Since Mario first won the hearts of gamers across the world in the early '80s, fans have been sketching up their own ideas for Mario levels on paper and imagining what sort of worlds they could create for the iconic plumber to explore. For this reason, Mario Maker seems like a tool that should have existed years ago – but it has been worth the wait.

After so many years starring in games, Mario's core mechanics are still fun. Running, leaping, and jumping on enemy heads feels identical to the way it has in the past, but now you are able to claim a certain amount of authorship over it. If you aren't interested in creating levels, you have more than 60 Nintendo-created stages to play through. They're short, so it's not enough to merit a stand-alone Mario game, but they're entertaining and do a good job of showing off what the game can do.

Despite not being anything close to a game designer, I have spent plenty of time with game-creation tools. I've created levels in games like LittleBigPlanet and worlds in Project Spark, but the process always feels time-consuming and complicated. In terms of ease of use and the time required to create something you are proud of, Super Mario Maker is the fastest and most rewarding.

It's easy to switch between the different eras of 2D Mario (Bros., Bros. 3, World, and New) while creating, but there is no cross-pollination among them, since each uses different physics

and power-ups. All the pieces and templates translate within each era, though, which offers an interesting opportunity to see how familiar mechanics and art assets have gone through subtle changes through Mario's 30 years.

Mechanics that can sometimes be surprisingly complicated in other creation games make more sense here. The GamePad makes everything simple and intuitive – you just point and place objects where you want them to go. The start and end points are already in place for you, enemy A.I. is taken care of, and a single button press ensures your jump gaps are acceptable lengths. I found myself giggling and enjoying my creations almost immediately, and never felt overwhelmed by my options.

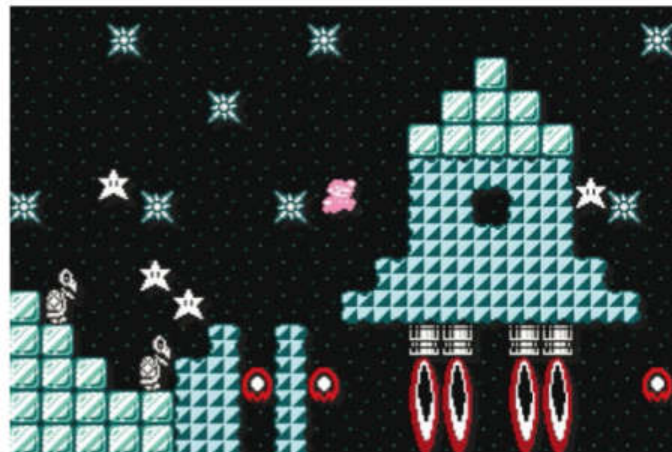
The tools and templates of Super Mario Maker are not all immediately available. New additions are added on a daily basis during the course of your first week with the game. At first, this restriction helped my levels improve; rather than throw every tool into my level, I accepted the constraints and worked within the limitations to make my levels better. After a few days, I started changing the Wii U's internal clock because I wanted to see everything and expand my options, and I'm sure others will be compelled to perform this "hack" as well.

Discovering new user-created levels is easy, since the best creators and levels are ranked into a list. You can also play a collection of random levels at varying difficulties in groups of 8 or 16 at a time.

Completing these batches in under 100 lives rewards new 8-bit characters which can be used in your created levels. I enjoyed finding new levels this way, especially with friends nearby to appreciate the more absurd creations.

Super Mario Maker is simple without being shallow and dense without being overwhelming. Its capabilities are limited compared to other creation games (you can only make platformer levels) but I never felt like I hit a wall in terms of creativity, and was consistently surprised by the work of others. Super Mario Maker will only grow from this point forward, but it already feels like the complete, 2D Mario creation tool we've been dreaming up since the first time we bounced off a koopa's shell.

» Kyle Hilliard





7 | Everybody's Gone To The Rapture

Platform PS4 **Release** August 11 **Rating** M

The Chinese Room has crafted another unique experiment that proudly stands out from the gaming norm, now with the improved graphical horsepower of the PS4. Despite the prettier locales and solid attempt to break out of the linear mold, Rapture simply doesn't feel rewarding when straying from the glowing golden path. – Tim Turi

6.5 | Life Is Strange: Episode 4 – The Dark Room

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC **Release** July 28 **Rating** M

Episode 4 isn't for the faint of heart – it's for those who have hope that this crazy ride has some satisfying solution that isn't as messed up as it seems. – Kimberley Wallace

5.5 | Danganronpa Another Episode: Ultra Despair Girls

Platform Vita **Release** September 1 **Rating** M

Ultra Despair Girls would be easier to bear if it were just an incidental side story that fans could ignore. Unfortunately, it's important to understanding the world of Danganronpa, but the gameplay and dialogue make you suffer every step of the way. – Joe Juba



7 | Tembo The Badass Elephant

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** July 21 **Rating** E10+

Tembo the Badass Elephant isn't quite as badass as its title may enthruse. It ticks off most of the classic platforming tropes – conveyor belts, disappearing platforms, and crushing pistons appear in bulk – but doesn't seem to add much of its own. – Jeff Cork

7 | Guild Of Dungeoneering

Platform PC **Release** July 14 **Rating** NR

Guild of Dungeoneering is a neat little romp, but the novelty wears off quickly as you fall into the progression loop. If you're looking for a bite-sized dungeon crawl, Guild of Dungeoneering delivers – but don't expect a lofty foray into the realms of exploration, customization, or strategy. – Daniel Tack

8 | N++

Platform PS4 **Release** July 28 **Rating** E

The most striking thing about N++ is how little has changed, even while so much content has been added. There is little flash or grandeur to Metanet's definitive and supposedly final N game, but for devoted and patient players, there's tremendous value here, along with a gameplay formula that has been refined into its current form over more than a decade. – Matt Miller

8.75 | Rare Replay

Platform Xbox One **Release** August 4 **Rating** E-M

I have little reason not to recommend Rare Replay, even to those who don't have nostalgia for the studio. The breadth of content is impressive, and each game has been faithfully ported and upgraded in ways that don't interfere with the original experience. – Kyle Hilliard

8.25 | The Talos Principle: Road To Gehenna

Platform PC **Release** July 23 **Rating** E

Road to Gehenna offers fewer puzzles overall, but they feel meatier than those in the base game. While a few were vexing, the clever solutions always washed away my frustrations. The Road to Gehenna is not a game for newcomers, but this compelling set of tests is bound to please those who delighted in the original The Talos Principle. – Ben Reeves

PLAYSTATION 4

Assassin's Creed		
Chronicles: China	7.25	Jun-15
Batman: Arkham Knight	9.5	Aug-15
Devil May Cry 4: Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
Game of Thrones Episode 3: The Sword in the Darkness	8.25	Jun-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4: Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
God of War III Remastered	9	Sep-15
Golf Club, The	8	Oct-14
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
MLB 15: The Show	8	Jun-15
Mortal Kombat X	9.25	Jun-15
Planetside 2	7.75	Sep-15
Project Cars	8.5	Jul-15
Rocket League	9	Sep-15
Rory McIlroy PGA Tour	7	Sep-15
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 2 – Atlas Mugged	6	Jun-15
Titan Souls	8.5	Jun-15
Tower of Guns	7.75	Jun-15
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, The	9.75	Jul-15
Wolfenstein: The Old Blood	7.5	Jul-15

XBOX ONE

Assassin's Creed		
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Magic Duels	8.75	Sep-15
Mortal Kombat X	9.25	Jun-15
Project Cars	8.5	Jul-15
Rory McIlroy PGA Tour	7	Sep-15
State of Decay: Year-One Survival Edition	7.5	Jul-15

Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 2 – Atlas Mugged	6	Jun-15
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PLAYSTATION 3

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XBOX 360

Game of Thrones Episode 3: The Sword in the Darkness	8.25	Jun-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4: Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 2 – Atlas Mugged	6	Jun-15

Wii U

Affordable Space Adventures	8	Jun-15
Splatoon	7.75	Aug-15

PC

Assassin's Creed		
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Convoy	7	Jun-15
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Devil May Cry 4: Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
Dungeons 2	8	Jun-15
Galactic Civilizations III	8.75	Jul-15
Game of Thrones Episode 3: The Sword in the Darkness	8.25	Jun-15

Game of Thrones Episode 4: Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
Hearthstone:		
Blackrock Mountain	9	Jul-15
Her Story	8.5	Sep-15
Heroes of the Storm	9.25	Aug-15
Invisible, Inc.	8	Jul-15
Kerbal Space Program	8.5	Jul-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Magic Duels	8.75	Sep-15
Magicka 2	7.25	Aug-15
Massive Chalice	8	Aug-15
Mortal Kombat X	9.25	Jun-15
Path of Exile:		
The Awakening	8.5	Sep-15
Pillars of Eternity	9.25	Jun-15
Project Cars	8.5	Jul-15
Ronin	7.75	Aug-15
Sunset	5.75	Aug-15
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 2 – Atlas Mugged	6	Jun-15
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Wolfenstein: The Old Blood	7.5	Jul-15
You Must Build A Boat	9	Aug-15

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STAFF

Publisher
Cathy Preston cathy@gameinformer.com

Editor-in-Chief
Andy McNamara andy@gameinformer.com

Executive Editor
Andrew Reiner reiner@gameinformer.com

Managing Editor
Matt Bertz mattbertz@gameinformer.com

Senior Reviews Editor
Joe Juba joe@gameinformer.com

Senior Previews Editor
Matt Miller miller@gameinformer.com

Features Editors
Kimberley Wallace kim@gameinformer.com
Tim Turi tim@gameinformer.com

News Editor
Michael Futter mike@gameinformer.com

PC Editor
Daniel Tack daniel@gameinformer.com

Senior Editors
Matthew Kato kato@gameinformer.com
Jeff Cork jeff@gameinformer.com
Ben Reeves ben@gameinformer.com

Senior Associate Editor
Jeff Marchiafava jeffm@gameinformer.com

Associate Editors
Kyle Hilliard kyle@gameinformer.com
Brian Shea brianshea@gameinformer.com

Creative Director
Jeff Akervik jeffakervik@gameinformer.com

Senior Production Director
Curtis Fung curtis@gameinformer.com

Graphic Designers
Laleh Azarshin Tobin laleh@gameinformer.com
Jason Pfitzer jasonpfitzer@gameinformer.com
Samm Langer samm@gameinformer.com

Web Designer/Programmer
Margaret Andrews margaretandrews@gameinformer.com

Video Producer
Ben Hanson hanson@gameinformer.com

Video Editor
Wade Wojcik wadewojcik@gameinformer.com

Circulation Services
Ted Katzung ted@gameinformer.com

Audience Development Manager
Paul Hedgpehth paul@gameinformer.com

Senior Product Manager
Lisa Wagner lisa@gameinformer.com

ADVERTISING SALES

Associate Publisher
Rob Born rob@gameinformer.com

Advertising Sales Director
Damon Watson damon@gameinformer.com

East Coast Advertising Associate
Amy Arnold amy@gameinformer.com

West Coast Advertising Associate
Janey Stringer janey@gameinformer.com

Marketing Coordinators
Rachel Castle rachel@gameinformer.com
Mark Burger mark@gameinformer.com

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Why Do People Love Shenmue?

We explore the continuing allure of Yu Suzuki's cult open-world series

by Kyle Hilliard

E 3 2015 featured several surprising announcements, like the return of *The Last Guardian* and the reveal of the long-requested remake of *Final Fantasy VII*. Despite these impressive fan-service gestures, however, the left-field reveal of a sequel to a 2000 Dreamcast title that didn't sell particularly well caused the Internet to erupt in unfiltered, exuberant praise, and ended up being one of the biggest stories of the show. *Shenmue III* is finally happening thanks to its hugely successful Kickstarter campaign that raised more than three times its \$2 million goal. Fans wanted this game to happen for years, but many may not be aware of its legacy.



The History

Yu Suzuki was an early innovator at Sega, creating experiences like Hang-On, Out Run, and Virtua Fighter. He developed quick-to-play, profitable experiences for Sega, but as early as the Sega Saturn era, he began exploring long-form narrative games with the intention to build something bigger.

Shenmue began in earnest as an RPG based on Virtua Fighter starring the series' poster boy, Akira. However, the game transformed into the story of an original character seeking revenge against the people responsible for his father's death.

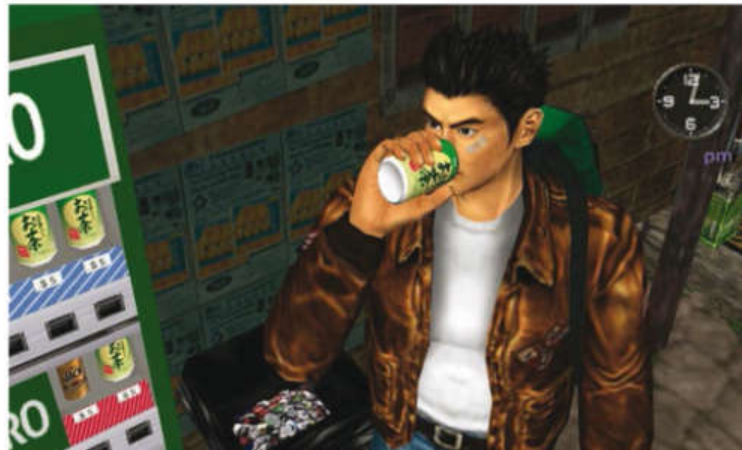
Shenmue was planned from the beginning to be a series of games with a story living beyond its first entry. Despite achieving critical success with an average review score of 89 percent according to GameRankings.com, the game failed to recoup its massive budget, which was rumored to have reached up to \$70 million. As a point of comparison, Heavy Rain, a similar game in many ways, cost approximately \$55 million to develop.

Thanks in part to the Dreamcast's small install base, the game sold just over one million copies. It's a respectable number, but the game is considered a commercial failure. A sequel, Shenmue II, released in Japan and Europe, and was later localized in North America by Microsoft for Xbox, but it was too little, too late. Despite frequent and loud fan outcry for a third entry, many had given up hope until Yu Suzuki took the stage during Sony's 2015 E3 press conference to announce a Kickstarter for Shenmue III, which garnered \$6,333,295 in funding.

The Game

Years before titles like Quantic Dreams' Heavy Rain and Telltale's The Walking Dead put emphasis on narrative, with quick-time events in place to supplement important scenes, Shenmue's protagonist Ryo was tapping buttons to on-screen prompts and spending more time chatting with NPCs than punching them. Shenmue is all about its story, its huge cast of characters, and its 3D open world. The combat, while competent and fun, is second to building a believable world.

The game begins with Ryo witnessing his father's death in his own home at the hand of antagonist Lan Di. Ryo's life pursuit from that point forward is discovering why his father was murdered, and finding Lan Di to return the favor. This new direction for Ryo, however, does not change that he has a life, responsibilities, and the human necessity of sleep.



Shenmue took the unique approach of making the player live out Ryo's life, waking up each morning, exploring the city of Yokosuka, developing relationships, and slowly picking away at the mystery that has become his larger purpose. At a certain point in the game, Ryo even needs to acquire a job.

Its pace is undeniably slow, but it is all in favor of building a living, breathing world that cannot be broken down by force alone. Shenmue was ahead of its time in this way, with a clear understanding that action and combat are not necessary to engage a player. A quiet scene reading a letter from Ryo's departed father or buying food to feed to an orphaned cat are just as important as picking a fight in a bar to track down sailors who know the whereabouts of Lan Di.

The Anticipation

Outcry for a sequel has been strong since the release of Shenmue II in 2001, mainly because the story was never completed. Ryo never found Lan Di. Sega devoted an incredible amount of time and money to Shenmue and its sequel to create an explorable world, and it all ultimately lead to an uncertain cliffhanger. An unresolved narrative arc is not uncommon in the world of entertainment, but Shenmue stands out as one of the first video games that heavily emphasized story without being able to deliver a satisfying conclusion.

An incredible amount of personal interest is invested in the outcome of Ryo's future. Finding Lan Di and the family heirloom he stole is important, but being able to role-play as Ryo again and explore his world is just as enticing. It's the reason a Kickstarter campaign became one of the biggest stories of E3 2015, why the game set a Guinness record for the fastest crowd-funded game to reach \$1 million, and how it set a Kickstarter record to become the most funded video game in the service's history. 💎

Shenmue Timeline

1996 — Creator Yu Suzuki begins work on a Virtua Fighter action RPG for the Sega Saturn that would eventually transform into Shenmue

1997 — Development resets and moves onto the Dreamcast

1998 — The Virtua Fighter RPG becomes an original project and has its name changed to Shenmue

1999 — Shenmue releases in Japan

2000 — Shenmue releases in North America

2001 — Shenmue II, developed in tandem with the original, releases in Japan and Europe

2002 — Microsoft gives Shenmue II the full localization treatment and releases the game as a North American Xbox exclusive

2004 — Shenmue Online, an MMORPG taking place in the Shenmue universe and during the events of Shenmue II, is announced. The game is quickly canceled and never sees release

2010 — Shenmue City, a Japan-exclusive mobile game, releases. In it, players control a Yokosuka resident and interact with Ryo periodically. The game gets shut down a year later

2015 — Shenmue III's Kickstarter launches during E3 2015 on June 16, requesting \$2 million to fund development. Within eight hours, Shenmue III meets its \$2 million funding goal. By the end of its campaign, 69,320 backers pledge \$6,333,295 toward the development of Shenmue III

Test Your Fallout Aptitude

Fallout 4 is coming this November, and more than a few prospective vault dwellers are counting down the days to its release. Are you a Fallout veteran? Do you have what it takes to survive in the Wasteland? Take our quiz and see if you're something special, or if you're more suited to slinging burgers in the vault's cafeteria.



by Jeff Cork

1. Who's your daddy...in Fallout 3?

- A) James
- B) Jonas
- C) Jeff
- D) Jimmy

2. Through a series of convenient accidents and unexpected deaths, you're put in charge of your vault. What should we call you?

- A) Your highness
- B) The Commander
- C) Overseer
- D) El Presidente

3. You and your fellow survivors are passing the time by telling stories about the first Fallout's vault dweller. From what vault did he hail?

- A) 123
- B) 13
- C) 111
- D) None of the above

4. Life in the Wasteland has numbed you to displays of extreme violence. What trait/perk should you choose if you want to sate your thirst for gore?

- A) Bloody Mess
- B) Gorehound
- C) Raining Blood
- D) Mayhem

5. Your friend, the nuclear apocalypse, is celebrating a birthday. You'd like to bake a cake. What day should you preheat the oven?

- A) October 10
- B) October 13
- C) October 23
- D) October 31

6. On the subject of cake, Andy, Vault 101's Mister Handy robot, accidentally destroyed the player's birthday cake. How'd he do it?

- A) Incinerated it with his flamethrower
- B) Smashed it with a radroach swatter
- C) His tiny claws dropped the tray
- D) Overzealous use of a circular saw

7. You're enjoying a relatively secure life in Fallout 1's vault. What on earth could possibly lure you out of there?

- A) A mass escape
- B) A search for a water-purification part
- C) An open door and a deeply curious nature
- D) Trick question – you start outside the vault in the first Fallout

8. Vault Dwellers have had a variety of friendly NPCs throughout the years. What entries in the Fallout series featured the canine companion Dogmeat?

- A) Fallout 1, Fallout 2, Fallout 3, Fallout 4
- B) Fallout 1, Fallout 3, Fallout 4
- C) Fallout 2, Fallout 3, Fallout 4
- D) Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel, Fallout 3, Fallout 4

9. If you don't answer this question, we're shutting down the power: Who runs New Vegas?

- A) Robert House
- B) Master Blaster
- C) The Tunnel Snakes
- D) The Mysterious Stranger

10. Wow! You've managed to get your hands on a Fat Man! What kind of ammo should you keep an eye out for?

- A) Mini nukes
- B) Bolts
- C) 9 millimeter rounds
- D) Teddy bears

11. You've worked up an appetite after wandering the Wastes for several weeks. What wouldn't you eat?

- A) Squirrel on a stick
- B) Irradiated salisbury steak
- C) Cram
- D) Ghoul flesh

12. There's only one way that wastelanders can quench their thirsts in Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel. What're you drinking?

- A) Nuka-Cola
- B) Mountain Doom
- C) Crupple
- D) Bawls Guarana

13. You're getting ready to take your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. exam to learn your placement within the vault. Surprise question: What's the "P" stand for?

- A) Perks
- B) Perception
- C) Positioning
- D) Personality

14. Your friend slips back into the vault after an unauthorized expedition. He rants and raves about a place called Little Lamplight, which has an interesting characteristic. What is it?

- A) Everyone who lives there is 16 or younger
- B) It's ruled by a megalomaniac named Dave
- C) It's built around a live nuke
- D) Your friend is lying; no such place exists in the Fallout universe

15. If there's one thing we can count on, it's the nature of war. How's that again?

- A) It's an ugly business
- B) It never changes
- C) It's not as bad as people say
- D) It's just the worst ♦

Answers: 1-A, 2-C, 3-B, 4-A, 5-C, 6-D, 7-B, 8-A, 9-A, 10-A, 11-D, 12-D, 13-B, 14-A, 15-B



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